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# LORD OAKBURN'S DAUGHTERS.

BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD,

AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE," "VERNER'S PRIDE," "THE SHADOW OF  
ASHLYDYAT," ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES.

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## CONTENTS.

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CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—THE ARRIVAL . . . . .	1
II.—HAPPILY OVER . . . . .	20
III.—THE ENCOUNTER AT THE RAILWAY STATION . . . . .	38
IV.—AN ACCIDENT . . . . .	54
V.—MR. CARLTON'S VISIT . . . . .	75
VI.—WAS THE HOUSE HAUNTED? . . . . .	87
VII.—THE COMPOSING DRAUGHT . . . . .	93
VIII.—THE COBWEBBED JAR . . . . .	111
IX.—POPULAR OPINION IN MOUTH WENNOCK . . . . .	128
X.—JUDITH'S PERPLEXITY . . . . .	137
XI.—THE CORONER'S INQUEST. . . . .	147
XII.—MR. CARLTON RECALLED . . . . .	171
XIII.—THE TORN NOTE . . . . .	188
XIV.—CAPTAIN CHESNEY'S HOME . . . . .	197
XV.—CAPTAIN CHESNEY . . . . .	211
XVI.—MISS CHESNEY'S FEAR. . . . .	228
XVII.—MR. CARLTON'S DEMAND . . . . .	248
XVIII.—THE FACE AGAIN . . . . .	264



CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX.—THE LETTERS . . . . .	282
XX.—DISAPPEARANCE . . . . .	299
XXI.—A DELIGHTFUL JAUNT . . . . .	313
XXII.—NEW HONOURS . . . . .	332
XXIII.—THE RETURN HOME . . . . .	351

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[It may be as well to state that this novel was originally written for America, and was first published in that country, but under quite a different title. The plot of the story, however, has been to a very great extent re-arranged and much enlarged ; and the entire work has been *re-written* from beginning to end.]

# LORD OAKBURN'S DAUGHTERS.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE ARRIVAL.

A SMALL country town in the heart of England was the scene some few years ago of a sad tragedy. I must ask my readers to bear with me while I relate it. These crimes, having their rise in the evil passions of our nature, are not the most pleasant for the pen to record ; but it cannot be denied that they do undoubtedly bear for many of us an interest amounting well nigh to fascination. I think the following account of what took place will bear such an interest for you.

South Wennock, the name of this place, was little more than a branch or offshoot of Great Wennock, a town of some importance, situated at two miles' distance from it. The lines of rail from London and from other places, meeting at Great Wennock, did not extend themselves to South Wennock ; consequently any railway travellers

arriving at the large town, had to complete their journey by the omnibus if they wished to go on to the small one.

The two miles of road which the omnibus had to traverse were about the worst to be met with in a civilized country. When it, the omnibus, had jolted its way over this road, it made its entrance to South Wennock in the very middle of the town. South Wennock might be said to consist of one long, straggling street, called High Street. Much building had been recently added to both ends of this old street. At the one end, the new buildings, chiefly terraces and semi-detached houses, had been named Palace Street, from the fact that the way led to the country palace of the bishop of the diocese. The new buildings at the other end of High Street were called the Rise, from the circumstance that the ground rose there gradually for a considerable distance; and these were mostly detached villas, some small, some large.

On the afternoon of Friday, the 10th of March, 1848, the railway omnibus, a cramped vehicle, constructed to hold six, came jolting along its route as usual. South Wennock lay stretched out in a line right across it in front, for the road was at a right angle with the town, and could the omnibus have dashed on without reference to houses, and such-like slight obstructions, as a railway engine does, it would

have cut the town in half, leaving part of High Street and the Rise to its right, the other part and Palace Street to its left.

The omnibus was not so fierce, however. It drove into High Street by the accustomed opening, turned short round to the left, and pulled up a few yards further at its usual place of stoppage, the Red Lion Inn. Mrs. Fitch, the landlady, an active, buxom dame with a fixed colour in her cheeks, and a bustling, genial manner, came hastening out to receive the guests it might have brought.

It had brought only a young lady and a trunk : and the moment Mrs. Fitch cast her eyes on the former's face, she thought it the most beautiful she had ever looked upon.

"Your servant, miss. Do you please to stay here?"

"For a short time, while you give me a glass of wine and a biscuit," was the reply of the traveller : and the tone, accent, and manner were unmistakeably those of a gentlewoman. "I shall be glad of the refreshment, for I feel exhausted. The shaking of the omnibus has been terrible."

She was getting out as she spoke, and something in her appearance more particularly attracted the attention of Mrs. Fitch, as the landlady helped her down the high and awkward steps, and marshalled her in-doors.

"Dear ma'am, I beg your pardon! It does shake, that omnibus—and you not in a condition to bear it! And perhaps you have come far besides, too! You shall have something in a minute. I declare I took you for a young unmarried lady."

"If you happen to have any cold meat, I would prefer a sandwich to the biscuit," was all the reply given by the traveller.

She sat down in the landlady's cushioned chair, for it was to her own parlour Mrs. Fitch had conducted her, untied her bonnet, and threw back the strings. The bonnet was of straw, trimmed with white ribbons, and her dress and mantle were of dark silk. Never was bonnet thrown back from a more lovely face, with its delicate bloom and its exquisitely refined features.

"Can you tell me whether there are any lodgings to be had in South Wennock?" she inquired, when the landlady came in again with the sandwiches and wine.

"Lodgings?" returned Mrs. Fitch. "Well, now, they are not over plentiful here; this is but a small place, you see, ma'am—not but what it's a deal larger than it used to be," continued the landlady, as she stroked her chin in deliberation. "There's Widow Gould's. I know her rooms were empty a week ago, for she was up here asking me if I couldn't hear of anybody wanting such. You'd be

comfortable there, ma'am, if she's not let. She's a quiet, decent body. Shall I send and inquire?"

"No, I would rather go myself. I should not like to fix upon rooms without seeing them. Should these you speak of be engaged, I may see bills in other windows. Thank you, I cannot eat more: I seem to feel the jolting of the omnibus still; and the fright it put me into has taken away my appetite. You will take care of my trunk for the present."

"Certainly, ma'am. What name?"

"Mrs. Crane."

The landlady stepped outside to direct the stranger on her way. Widow Gould's house was situated in the first terrace in Palace Street, and a walk of six or seven minutes brought Mrs. Crane to it. It had a card in the window, indicating that its rooms were to let. Widow Gould herself, a shrinking little woman, with a pinched, red face, came to the door. The lady wanted a sitting-room and bedroom: could she be accommodated? Mrs. Gould replied that she could, mentioned a very moderate charge, and invited her in to see the rooms. They were on the first floor; not large, but clean and nice and convenient, the one room opening into the other. Mrs. Crane liked them very much.

"You perceive that I am expecting to be laid by," she said. "Would that be an objection?"

"N—o, I don't see that it need," replied the widow, after some consideration. "Of course you would have proper attendance, ma'am? I could not undertake that."

"Of course I should," said Mrs. Crane.

So the bargain was made. Mrs. Crane taking the rooms for a month certain, intimating that she preferred engaging them only from month to month, and the Widow Gould undertaking to supply all ordinary attendance. Mrs. Crane went back to the inn, to pay for the refreshment of which she had partaken, and to desire her trunk to be sent to her, having ordered tea to be ready against her return to Palace Street.

She found everything prepared for her, a nice fire burning in the sitting-room grate, the tea on the table, and Mrs. Gould in the adjoining room putting sheets upon the bed. The widow was in spirits at the prospect of her rooms being wanted for some months, as she believed they would be, and had placed the last weekly South Wennock newspaper on the table beside the tea-tray, a little mark of extra attention to her new lodger.

In obedience to the ring when tea was over, Mrs. Gould came up to remove the things. Mrs. Crane was seated before them. A fair young girl she looked with her bonnet off, in her silk dress and her golden brown hair. The widow kept no ser-

vant, but waited on her lodgers herself. Her parlours were let to a permanent lodger, who was at that time absent from South Wennock.

"Be so good as take a seat," said Mrs. Crane to her, laying down the newspaper, which she appeared to have been reading. But Mrs. Gould preferred to stand, and began rubbing one shrivelled hand over the other, her habit when in waiting. "I have some information to ask of you. Never mind the tray; it can wait. First of all, what medical men have you at South Wennock?"

"There's the Greys," was Widow Gould's response.

A pause ensued, Mrs. Crane probably waiting to hear the list augmented. "The Greys?" she repeated, finding her informant did not continue.

"Mr. John and Mr. Stephen Grey, ma'am. There was another brother, Mr. Robert, but he died last year. Nice pleasant gentlemen all three, and they have had the whole of the practice here. Their father and their uncle had it before them."

"Do you mean to say there are no other medical men?" exclaimed the stranger, in some surprise. "I never heard of such a thing in a place as large as this appears to be."

"South Wennock has only got large lately, ma'am. The Greys were very much liked and respected in



the place ; and being three of them, they could get through the work, with an assistant. They always keep one. But there is another doctor here now, a gentleman of the name of Carlton."

"Who is he?"

"Well, I forget where it was said he came from ; London, I think. A fine dashing gentleman as ever you saw, ma'am ; not above thirty, at the most. He came suddenly among us a few months ago, took a house at the other end of the town, and set up against the Greys. He is getting on, I believe, especially with the people that live on the Rise, mostly fresh comers ; and he keeps his cabrioily."

"Keeps his what?"

"His cabrioily—a dashing one-horse carriage with a head to it. It is more than the Greys have ever done, ma'am ; they have had their plain gig, and nothing else. Some think that Mr. Carlton has private property, and some think he is making a show to get into practice."

"Is he clever—Mr. Carlton?"

"There are those here who'll tell you he is cleverer than the two Greys put together ; but ma'am, I don't forget the old saying, New brooms sweep clean. Mr. Carlton, being new in the place, and having a practice to make, naturally puts out his best skill to make it."

The remark drew forth a laugh from Mrs. Crane.

"But unless a doctor has the skill within him, he cannot put it out," she said.

"Well, of course there's something in that," returned the widow, reflectively. "Any ways, Mr. Carlton is getting into practice, and it's said he is liked. There's a family on the Rise where he attends constantly, and I've heard they think a great deal of him. It's a Captain Chesney, an old gentleman, who has the gout perpetual. They came strangers to the place from a distance, and settled here; very proud, exclusive people, it's said. There's three Miss Chesneys; one of them beautiful; t'other's older; and the little one, she's but a child. Mr. Carlton attends there a great deal, for the old gentleman——Good heart alive! what's the matter?"

Mrs. Gould might well cry out. The invalid—and an invalid she evidently was—had turned of a ghastly whiteness, and was sinking back motionless in her chair.

Mrs. Gould was timid by nature, nervous by habit. Very much frightened, she raised the lady's head, but it fell back unconscious. In the excitement induced by the moment's terror, she flew down the stairs, shrieking out in the empty house, burst out at her own back door, ran through the yard, and burst into the back door of the adjoining house. Two young women were in the kitchen;

the one ironing, the other sitting by the fire and not doing anything.

"For the love of Heaven, come back with me, one of you!" called out the widow, in a tremor. "The new lady lodger I told you of this afternoon has gone and died right off in her chair."

Without waiting for assent or response, she flew back again. The young woman at the fire started from her seat, alarm depicted on her countenance. The other calmly continued her ironing.

"Don't be frightened, Judith," said she. "You are not so well used to Dame Gould as I am. If a blackbeetle falls on the floor, she'll cry out for aid. I used to think it was put on, but I have come at last to the belief that she can't help it. You may as well go in, however, and see what it is."

Judith hastened away. She was a sensible-looking young woman, pale, with black hair and eyes, and was dressed in new and good mourning. Mrs. Gould was already in her lodger's sitting-room. She had torn a feather from the small feather-duster hanging by the mantelpiece, had scorched the end, and was holding it to the unhappy lady's nose. Judith dashed the feather to the ground.

"Don't be so stupid, Mrs. Gould! What good do you suppose that will do? Get some water."

The water was procured, and Judith applied it to

the face and hands, the widow looking timidly on. As the lady revived, Mrs. Gould burst into tears.

"It's my feelings that overcomes me, Judith," said she. "I can't abear the sight of illness."

"You need not have been alarmed," the invalid faintly said, as soon as she could speak. "For the last few months, since my health has been delicate, I have been subject to these attacks of faintness; they come on at any moment. I ought to have warned you."

When fully restored they left her to herself, Mrs. Gould carrying away the tea-things; having first of all unlocked the lady's trunk by her desire, and brought to her from it a small writing-case.

"Don't go away, Judith," the widow implored, when they reached the kitchen. "She may have another of those fits, for what we can tell—you heard her say she was subject to them—and you know what a one I am to be left with illness. It would be a charity to stop with me; and you are a lady at large just now."

"I'll go and get my work, then, and tell Margaret. But where's the sense of your calling it a fit, as if you were speaking of apoplexy?" added Judith.

When the girl came back—though, indeed, she was not much of a girl, being past thirty—Mrs. Gould had lighted a candle, for it was growing dark,

and was washing the tea-things. Judith sat down to her sewing, her thoughts intent upon the lady upstairs.

"Who is she, I wonder?" she said aloud.

"Some stranger. Mrs. Fitch sent her down to me—I told Margaret about it this afternoon when you were out, I say, isn't she young?"

Judith nodded. "I wonder if she is married?"

"Married!" angrily retorted Mrs. Gould. "If the wedding-ring upon her finger had been a bear it would have bit you. Where were your eyes?"

"All wedding-rings have not been put on in churches," was the composed answer of the girl. "Not but that I daresay she is married, for she seems a modest, good lady; it was her being so young, and coming here in this sudden manner, all unprotected, that set me on the other thought. Where is her husband?"

"Gone abroad," she said. "I made free to ask her."

"Why does she come here?"

"I can't tell. It does seem strange. She never was near the place in her life before this afternoon, she told me, and had no friends in it. She has been inquiring about the doctors——"

"That's her bell," interrupted Judith, as the bell hanging over Mrs. Gould's head began to sound. "Make haste. I dare say she wants lights."

"She has got them. The candles were on the mantelpiece, and she said she'd light them herself."

A sealed note lay on the table when Mrs. Gould entered the drawing-room. The lady laid her hand upon it.

"Mrs. Gould, I must trouble you to send this note for me. I did not intend to see about a medical man until to-morrow; but I feel fatigued and sick, and I think I had better see one to-night. He may be able to give me something to calm me."

"Yes, ma'am. They live almost close by, the Greys. But, dear lady, I hope you don't feel as if you were going to be ill!"

Mrs. Crane smiled. Her nervous landlady was rubbing her hands together in an access of trembling.

"Not ill in the sense I conclude you mean it. I do not expect that for these two months. But I don't want to alarm you with a second fainting fit. I am in the habit of taking drops, which do me a great deal of good, and I unfortunately left them behind me, so I had better see a doctor. Was that your daughter who came up just now? She seemed a nice young woman."

The question offended Mrs. Gould's vanity beyond everything. She believed herself to be remarkably young-looking, and Judith was two-and-thirty if she was a day.

"No, indeed, ma'am, she's not; and I've neither

chick nor child," was the resentful answer. "She's nothing but Judith Ford, sister to the servant at the next door; and being out of place, her sister's mistress said she might come there for a few days while she looked out. I'll get her to carry the note for me."

Mrs. Gould took the note from the table, and was carrying it away without looking at it, when the lady called her back.

"You see to whom it is addressed, Mrs. Gould?"

Mrs. Gould stopped, and brought the note close to her eyes. She had not her spectacles upstairs, and it was as much as she could do to see anything without them.

"Why—ma'am! It—it—it's to Mr. Carlton."

The lady looked surprised in her turn. "Why should it not be to Mr. Carlton?" she demanded.

"But the Greys are sure and safe, ma'am. Such a thing has never been known as for them to lose one of their lady patients."

Mrs. Crane paused, apparently in indecision. "Has Mr. Carlton lost them?"

"Well—no; I can't remember that he has. But, ma'am, he attends one where the Greys attend ten."

"When you were speaking this evening of the doctors, I nearly made up my mind to engage Mr. Carlton," observed Mrs. Crane. "I think men of skill struggling into practice should be encouraged."

If you have anything really serious to urge against him, that is quite a different thing, and you should speak out."

"No, ma'am, no," was the widow's reply; "and I am sure it has been rude of me to object to him, if your opinion lies that way. I don't know a thing against Mr. Carlton; people call him clever. I am naturally prejudiced in favour of the Greys, for Mr. John has attended me ever since he grew up, as his father did before him. I'll send this down to Mr. Carlton's."

"Let it go at once, if you please. I should like, if possible, to see him to-night."

Mrs. Gould descended to the kitchen. On the dresser, staring her in the face when she entered, lay her spectacles. She put them on, and looked at the superscription on the note.

"Well, now, that's a curious thing, if ever there was one! 'Lewis Carlton, Esq.!' How did she know his name was Lewis? I never mentioned it. I couldn't mention it, for I did not know it myself. Is his name Lewis?"

"For all I can tell," responded Judith. "Yes," she added, more decisively, "of course it is Lewis; it is on his door-plate. Perhaps Mrs. Fitch told her."

"There! that's it!" exclaimed the widow, struck with sudden conviction. "Mrs. Fitch has been



speaking up for him, and that's what has put her on to Mr. Carlton, and off the Greys. There was a traveller ill at the Red Lion in the winter, and he had Mr. Carlton. It's a shame of Mrs. Fitch to turn round on old friends."

"I can tell you where she got the name from, though perhaps Mrs. Fitch did speak for him," cried Judith, suddenly. "There's his card—as they call it—in that newspaper you lent her, 'Mr. Lewis Carlton: Consulting Surgeon.' She couldn't fail to see it. Is she ill, that she is sending for him? She looks not unlikely to be."

"I say, Judy, don't go frightening a body like that," cried the woman, in tremor. "She won't be ill for these two months; but that nasty omnibus has shook her, and I suppose the faint finished it up. Oh, it rattles over the road without regard to folk's bones. You'll take this for me, won't you, Judith?"

"I dare say!" returned Judith.

"Come, do; there's a good woman! I can't go myself, for fear her bell should ring. It's a fine night, and the run will do you good."

Judith, not unaccommodating, rose from her seat. "There now!" she exclaimed, in a tone of vexation, as she took the note, "how am I to get my things? Margaret's gone out, and she is sure to have bolted the back-door. I don't like to disturb

old Mrs. Jenkinson ; the night's coldish, or I'd go without my bonnet rather than do it."

"Put on mine," suggested Mrs. Gould. "You are welcome to it, and to my shawl too."

Judith laughed ; and she laughed still more when arrayed in Mrs. Gould's things. The shawl did very well, but the bonnet was large, one of those called a "poke," and she looked like an old woman in it. "Nobody will fall in love with me to-night, that's certain," said she, as she sped off.

Mr. Carlton's house was situated at the other end of the town, just before the commencement of the Rise. It stood by itself, on the left ; a handsome white house, with iron rails round it, and a pillared portico in front. Judith ascended the steps and rang at the bell.

The door was flung open by a young man in livery. "Can I see Mr. Carlton?" she asked.

The man superciliously threw back his head. Judith's large old bonnet did not tell in her favour. "Is it on professional business?" he questioned.

"Yes, it is."

"Then perhaps, mem, you'll have the obleegance to walk round to the perfessional entrance ; and that's on that there side."

He waved his hand condescendingly to the side of the house. Judith complied, but she gave him a word at parting.

"Pray, how much wages do you earn?"

"If ever I heered such a question put to a gentleman!" cried the man in astonishment.

"What is it to you?"

"Because I should judge that you get so much paid you for clothes, and so much for airs."

Passing down the steps, and out of reach of sundry compliments he honoured her with in return, she went to the side, and found herself in front of a door with "Surgery" written on it. It opened to a passage, and thence to a small square room, whose walls were lined with bottles. A boy in buttons was lying at full length on the counter, whistling a shrill note, and kicking his heels in the air. The entrance startled him, and he tumbled off, feet foremost.

It was but twilight yet, and not at first did he gather in Judith's appearance; but soon the poke bonnet disclosed itself to view.

"Hulloa!" cried he. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want Mr. Carlton. Is he at home?"

"No, he isn't."

"Then you must go out and find him. This note must be instantly given to him. A lady wants to see him to-night."

"Then I'm afeard want must be the lady's master," returned the impudent boy. "Perhaps

we might get this note tied on to the telegraph wires, and send it to him that fashion ; there ain't no other way of doing it. Mr. Carlton went off to London this morning."

"To London !" repeated Judith, surprise checking her inclination to box the young gentleman's ears. "When is he coming home again ? "

"When his legs brings him. There ! He'll be home in a couple of days," added the boy, dodging out of Judith's reach, and deeming it as well to cease his banter. "His father, Dr. Carlton, was took ill, and sent for him. Now you know."

"Well," said Judith, after a pause of consideration, "you had better take charge of this note, and give it to him when he does come home. I don't know anything else that can be done. And I'd recommend you not to be quite so free with your tongue, unless you want to come to grief," was her parting salutation, as she quitted the boy and the house.

## CHAPTER II.

### HAPPILY OVER.

As Judith Ford went back through the lighted streets, the landlady of the Red Lion was standing at her door.

“Good evening, Mrs. Fitch.”

“Why, who—why, Judith, it’s never you! What on earth have you been making yourself such a guy as that for?”

Judith laughed, and explained how it was that she happened to be out in Mrs. Gould’s things, and where she had been to. “After all, my visit has been a useless one,” she remarked, “for Mr. Carlton is away. Gone to London, that impudent boy of his said.”

“I could have told you so, and saved you the trouble of a walk, had I seen you passing,” said Mrs. Finch. “His groom drove him to the Great Wenlock station this morning, and called here as he came back for a glass of ale. Is the lady ill?”

“She does not seem well; she had a fainting-fit

just after tea, and thought she had better see a doctor at once."

"And Dame Gould could send for Mr. Carlton! What have the Greys done to her?"

"Dame Gould thought you recommended Mr. Carlton to the lady."

"I!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitch, "well, that's good! I never opened my lips to the lady about any doctor at all."

"It was her own doing to send for Mr. Carlton, and Mrs. Gould thought you must have spoken for him."

"Not I. If I had spoken for any it would have been for the Greys, who are our old fellow townspeople; not but what Mr. Carlton is a nice pleasant gentleman, skilful too. Look here, Judith, you tell Dame Gould that when the time comes for the young lady to be ill, if there's currant jelly wanted for her, or any little matter of that sort, she can send to me for it, and welcome. I don't know when I have seen such a sweet young lady."

Judith gave a word of thanks, and sped on towards Palace Street. She had barely rang the bell when she heard Mrs. Gould floundering down-stairs in hot haste. She flung open the door, and seized hold of Judith.

"Oh, Judith, thank Heaven you are come! What on earth's to be done? She is taken ill!"

"Taken ill!" repeated Judith.

"She is, she is, really ill; it's as true as that you are alive. Where's Mr. Carlton?"

Judith made no reply. Shaking off the timorous woman, and the shawl and bonnet at the same time, which she thrust into her hands, she sped up to the sitting-room. Mrs. Crane was clasping the arm of the easy-chair, in evident pain; the combs were out of her hair, which now fell in wavy curls on her neck, and she moaned aloud in what looked like terror, as she cast her fair girlish face up to Judith. Never, Judith thought, had she seen eyes so wondrously beautiful; they were large tender brown eyes, soft and mournful, and they and their peculiarly sweet expression became fixed from that hour in Judith's memory.

"Don't be cast down, poor child," she said, forgetting ceremony in her compassion, "Lean on me. It will be all right."

She laid her head on Judith's shoulder. "Will Mr. Carlton be long?" she moaned. "Cannot some one go and hurry him?"

"Mr. Carlton can't come, ma'am," was Judith's answer. "He went to London this morning."

A moment's lifting of the head, a sharp cry of disappointment, and the poor head fell again and the face was hidden. Judith strove to impart comfort.

"They are all strangers to you, ma'am, so what

can it matter? I know you cannot fail to like the Greys as well as you would Mr. Carlton. Nay, dear young lady, don't take on so. Everybody likes Mr. John and Mr. Stephen Grey. Why should you have set your mind on Mr. Carlton?"

She lifted her eyes, wet with tears, whispering into Judith's ear.

"I cannot afford to pay both, and it is Mr. Carlton I have written to."

"Pay both! of course not!" responded Judith in a warm tone. "If Mr. Carlton can't come because he is away and Mr. Grey attends for him, there'll be only one of them to pay. Doctors understand all that, ma'am. Mr. Carlton might take Mr. Grey's place with you as soon as he is back again, if you particularly wish for him."

"I did wish for him, I do wish for him. Some friends of mine know Mr. Carlton well, and they speak highly of his skill. They recommended him to me."

That explains it, thought Judith, but she was interrupted by a quaking, quivering voice beside her.

"What in the world will be done?"

It was Widow Gould's, of course. Judith scarcely condescended to answer: strong in sense herself, she had no sympathy with that sort of weakness.

"The first thing for you to do is to leave off



being an idiot; the second, is to go and fetch one of the Mr. Greys."

"I will not have the Mr. Greys," spoke the young lady peremptorily, lifting her head from the cushion of the easy-chair, where she had now laid it. "I don't like the Mr. Greys, and I will not have them."

"Then, ma'am, you must have been prejudiced against them!" exclaimed Judith.

"True," said Mrs. Crane; "so far as that I have heard they are not clever."

Judith could only look her utter astonishment. The Greys not clever! But Mrs. Crane interposed against further discussion.

"I may not want either of them, after all," she said; "I am feeling easy again now. Perhaps if you leave me alone I shall get a bit of sleep."

They arranged the cushions about her comfortably, and went down-stairs, where a half dispute ensued. Judith reproached Mrs. Gould for her childish cowardice, and that lady retorted that if folks were born timid they couldn't help themselves. In the midst of it, a great cry came from above, and Judith flew up. Mrs. Gould followed, taking her leisure over it, and met the girl, who had come quickly down again, making for the front door.

"One of the Mr. Greys must be got here, whether or not," she said in passing; "she's a great deal worse."

"But, Judy, look here," were the arresting words of the widow. "Who'll be at the responsibility? She says she won't have the Greys, and I might have to pay them out of my own pocket."

"Nonsense!" retorted Judith. "I'd not bring up pockets, if I were you, when a fellow-creature's life is at stake. You go up to her then; perhaps you can do that."

Judith hastened into the street. The two brothers lived in houses contiguous to each other, situated about midway between Mrs. Gould's and the Red Lion Inn. Mr. John, generally called Mr. Grey, occupied the larger house, which contained the surgery and laboratory; Mr. Stephen the smaller one adjoining. Mr. Stephen, the younger, had married when he was only twenty-one, and he now wanted a year or two of forty; Mr. John had more recently married, and had a troop of very young children.

The hall door of Mr. John's house stood open, and Judith went in, guided by the bright lamp in the fanlight. Too hurried to stand upon ceremony, she crossed the hall and pushed open the surgery door. A handsome, gentlemanly lad of sixteen stood there, pounding drugs with a pestle and mortar. Not perhaps that the face was so handsome in itself: but the exceeding intelligence pervading it, the broad, intellectual forehead; the

honest expression of the large and earnest blue eyes, would have made the beauty of any countenance. He was the son and only child of Mr. Stephen Grey.

"What, is it you, Judith?" he exclaimed, turning his head quickly as she entered. "You come gliding in like a ghost."

"Because I am in haste, Master Frederick. Are the gentlemen at home?"

"Papa is. Uncle John's not."

"I want to see one of them, if you please, sir."

The boy vaulted off, and returned with Mr. Stephen: a merry-hearted man with a merry and benevolent countenance, who never suffered the spirits of his patients to go down while he could keep them up. A valuable secret in medical treatment.

"Well, Judith? and what's the demand for you?" he jokingly asked. "Another tooth to be drawn?"

"I'll tell my errand to yourself, sir, if you please."

Without waiting to be sent, Frederick Grey retired from the surgery and closed the door. Judith gave an outline of the case to Mr. Stephen Grey.

He looked grave; grave for him; and paused a moment when she had ceased.

"Judith, girl, we would prefer not to interfere with Mr. Carlton's patients. It might appear, look you, as though we grudged him the few he had got together, and would wrest them from him. We wish nothing of the sort: the place is large enough for us all."

"And what is the poor young lady to do, sir? To die?"

"To die!" echoed Stephen Grey. "Goodness forbid."

"But she may die, sir, unless you or Mr. Grey can come to her aid. Mr. Carlton can be of no use to her, he is in London."

Mr. Stephen Grey felt the force of the argument. While Mr. Carlton was in London, the best part of a hundred miles off, he could not be of much use to anybody in South Wennock."

"True, true," said he, nodding his head. "I'll go back with you, Judith. Very young, you say? Where's her husband?"

"Gone travelling abroad, sir," replied Judith, somewhat improving upon the information supplied by Mrs. Gould. "Is there no nurse that can be got in, sir?" she continued. "I never saw such a stupid woman as that Mrs. Gould is in illness."

"Nurse? To be sure. Time enough for that. Frederick," Mr. Stephen called out to his son, as he crossed the hall, "if your uncle comes in before I

am back, tell him I am at Widow Gould's. A lady, who has come to lodge there, is taken ill."

Judith ran on first, and got back before Mr. Stephen. Somewhat to her surprise, she found Mrs. Crane seated at the table, writing.

"You are better, ma'am!"

"No, I am worse. This has come upon me unexpectedly, and I must write to apprise a friend."

The perspiration induced by pain was running off her as she spoke. She appeared to have written but two or three lines, and was thrusting the letter into an envelope. Mrs. Gould stood by, helplessly rubbing her hands, her head shaking with a tremulous motion, as though she had St. Vitus's dance.

"Will you post it for me?"

"Yes, sure I will, ma'am," replied Judith, taking the note which she held out. "But I fear it is too late to go to-night."

"It cannot be helped: put it in the post at all risks. And you had better call on one of the medical gentlemen you spoke of, and ask him to come and see me."

"I have been, ma'am," replied Judith, in a glow of triumph. "He is following me down. And that's his ring," she added, as the bell was heard. "It is Mr. Stephen Grey, ma'am; Mr. Grey was not at home. Of the two brothers Mr. Stephen is

the pleasantest, but they are both nice gentlemen. You can't fail to like Mr. Stephen."

She went out with the letter, glancing at the superscription. It was addressed to London, to Mrs. Smith. On the stairs she encountered Mr. Stephen Grey.

"I suppose I am too late for the post to-night, sir?" she asked. "It is a letter from the lady."

Mr. Stephen took out his watch. "Not if you make a run for it, Judith. It wants four minutes to the time of closing."

Judith ran off. She was light and active, one of those to whom running is easy; and she saved the post by half a minute. Mr. Stephen Grey meanwhile, putting the Widow Gould aside with a merry nod, entered the room alone. Mrs. Crane was standing near the table, one hand lay on it, the other was pressed on her side, and her anxious, beautiful eyes were strained on the door. As they fell on the doctor an expression of relief came into her face. Mr. Stephen went up to her, wondering at her youth. He took one of her hands in his, and looked down with his reassuring smile.

"And now tell me all about what's the matter?"

She kept his hand, as if there were protection in it, and the tears came into her eyes as she raised them to him, speaking in a whisper.

"I am in great pain: such pain! Do you think I shall die?"

"Die!" cheerily echoed Mr. Stephen. "Not you. You may talk about dying in some fifty or sixty years to come, perhaps; but not now. Come, sit down, and let us have a little quiet chat together."

"You seem very kind, and I thank you," she said; "but before going further, I ought to tell you that I am Mr. Carlton's patient, for I had written to engage him before I knew he was away. I am come an entire stranger to Squith Wennock, and I had heard of Mr. Carlton's skill from some friends."

"Well, we will do the best we can for you until Mr. Carlton's return, and then leave you in his hands. Are you quite alone?"

"It happens unfortunately that I am. I have just sent a note to the post to summon a friend. You see I never expected to be ill for the next two months."

"And very likely you will not be," returned Mr. Stephen. "When you shall have got half-a-dozen children about you, young lady, you will know what importance to attach to false alarms. Your husband is abroad, I hear?"

She inclined her head in the affirmative.

But it was no false alarm. The lady got worse with every minute; and when Judith came back

she met Mr. Stephen, coming forth from the bedroom.

"You must help me, Judith," he said. "Dame Gould is utterly useless. First of all, look in the lady's travelling trunk. She says there are baby's clothes and other things there. Make haste over it."

"I'll do anything and everything I can, sir," replied Judith; "but I'd *make* her useful. I have no patience with her."

"I'll make her useful in one way if I don't in another. Where is she now?"

"Sitting on the stairs outside, sir, with her hands to her ears."

"Oh!" said Mr. Stephen, and he went out to the widow.

"Mrs. Gould, you know Grote's Buildings?"

"In course, sir, I do," was the whimpered answer, as she rose. "Oh, sir, I'm shook!"

"Go there without delay: you can shake as you go along, you know. Ask for Mrs. Hutton, and desire her to come here to me immediately. Tell her the nature of the case."

Mrs. Gould lost no time in starting, glad to be out of the house. She returned with a short, stout barrel of a woman, with grizzled hair and black eyes. She was attired in a light-coloured print gown, and went simpering into the room, carrying



a bundle, and dropping curtseys to Mr. Stephen Grey. Mr. Stephen stared at the woman for a full minute, as if in disbelief of his own eyes, and his face turned to severity.

"Who sent for you, Mrs. Pepperfly?"

"Well, sir; please, sir, I came," was the response, the curtseys dropping all the while. "You sent for Hutton, sir; but she were called out this afternoon; and I was a stopping at number three, and thought I might come in her place."

"Hutton was called out this afternoon?"

"This very blessed afternoon what's gone, sir, just as four o'clock was a striking from St. Mark's church. Mrs. Gilbert on the Rise is took with her fever again, sir, and she won't have nobody but Hutton to nurse her."

Mr. Stephen Grey ran over the sisterhood of nurses in his mind, but could think of none available just then. He beckoned the woman from the room.

"Hark ye, Mother Pepperfly," he said, in a stern tone. "You know your failing; now, if you dare to give way to it this time, as you have done before, you shall never again nurse a patient of mine or my brother's. You can do your duty—none better—if you choose to keep in a fit state to do it. Take care you do so."

Mrs. Pepperfly squeezed out a tear. She'd be upon her Bible oath, if Mr. Stephen chose to put

her to it, not to touch nothing no stronger than table beer. Mr. Stephen, however, did not put her to the ordeal.

There was sufficient bustle in the house that night; but by the morning quiet and peace had supervened; and Nurse Pepperfly, on her best behaviour, was carrying about, wrapped in flannel, a wee wee infant.

Judith had not left Mrs. Crane's side during the night, and the latter appeared to be drawn to her by some attraction, to find comfort in her genuine sympathy.

"You have been a good girl, Judith," Mr. Stephen said to her as he was leaving in the morning, and she went down to open the door for him.

"Will she do well, sir?" asked Judith.

"Famously," answered Mr. Stephen. "Never had a safer case in my life. Give a look to Mother Pepperfly, Judith. I trust her as far as I can see her. I shall be back in a couple of hours."

Things went on well during the day. Mrs. Pepperfly busied herself chiefly with the baby, nursing it by the fire in the sitting-room; Judith attended on the sick lady. In the afternoon, Mrs. Crane, who was lying awake, suddenly addressed her.

"Judith, how is it you are able to be with me?"

I thought the landlady told me you were in service."

"Not just now, ma'am. I have been in service, but have left my place, and am stopping with my sister, at the next door, while I look out for another."

"Does your sister let lodgings, as Mrs. Gould does?"

"A lady lives at the next door, a Mrs. Jenkinson," was Judith's reply, "and my sister is her servant. Margaret has lived with her going on for eleven years."

"So that just now you are at liberty?"

"Quite so, ma'am."

"See now how merciful God is!" spoke Mrs. Crane, placing her hands together in an attitude of reverence. "Last night, when I began to feel ill, and thought I should have nobody about me but that timid Mrs. Gould, I turned sick with perplexity,—with fear, I may say,—at the prospect of being left with her. And then you seemed to be raised up for me, as it were on purpose, and can be with me without let or hindrance. None but those who have stood in need of it," she added, after a pause, "can know the full extent of God's mercy."

A glow, partly of pleasure, partly of shame, came over Judith's face as she listened. In a little corner of her inmost heart there had lurked a doubt

whether it was all as straight as it ought to be with the young lady who had come there in so strange a manner—whether that plain gold ring on her finger had been a genuine wedding-ring, or but a false bauble placed there to deceive. The above reverential words of trust convinced Judith that the lady, whoever she might be, and whatever might be the mystery, was as honest as she was, and she took shame to herself for doubting her. No girl, living a life of sin, could speak with that unaffected simplicity of the goodness of God. At least, so felt Judith.

“I think, Judith, you must have been accustomed to attend on the sick?”

“Pretty well, ma’am. In my last place, where I lived four years, my mistress’s sister was bed-ridden, and I waited on her. She was a great sufferer. She died just three weeks ago, and they did not want me any more: that’s why I am changing places.”

“The mourning you wear is for her?”

“Yes it is, ma’am. Mr. Stephen Grey was her doctor, and never failed to come every day all those four years; so that I feel quite at home with him, if that is a proper expression for a servant to use when speaking of a gentleman.”

“What was the matter with her?”

“It was an inward complaint, causing her dis-

tressing pain. We were always trying fresh remedies to give her ease, but they did not do much good. I don't fancy Mr. Stephen ever thought they would; but she would have them tried. Ah, ma'am! we talk about suffering, and pity it, when people are laid up for a week or two; but only think what it must be to lie by for years, and be in acute pain night and day!"

The tears had come into Judith's eyes at the remembrance. Mrs. Crane looked at her. She had a large, full forehead, strongly marked. One, gifted with phrenological lore, would have pronounced her largely gifted with concentration and reticence. Good qualities when joined to an honest heart.

"Judith, where was my workbox put?"

"It is here, ma'am, on the drawers."

"Unlock it, will you? You will find my keys somewhere about. Inside the little compartment that lifts up, you will see a locket set round with pearls."

Judith did as she was bid, and brought forth the locket. It was a charming little trinket of blue enamel, the gold rim round it studded with pearls, and a place for hair in the front. A very fine gold chain, about two inches long, was attached; so that it could be worn to a necklace, or pendant to a bracelet.

"Take it, Judith. It is for you."

“ Oh, ma’am ! ”

“ That is my own hair inside ; but you can take it out if you like, and put in your sweetheart’s. I daresay you have one.”

“ A costly toy like this is not fit for me, ma’am. I could not think of taking it.”

“ But it is fit for you, and I’m glad to give it you ; and I owe you a great deal more than that, for what I should have done without you I don’t know,” reiterated the invalid. “ Put it up in your treasure-box, Judith.”

“ I’m sure I don’t know how to say enough thanks,” spoke Judith in her gratitude. “ I shall keep it to my dying day, dear lady, and store up the hair in it for ever.”

## CHAPTER III.

### THE ENCOUNTER AT THE RAILWAY STATION.

“HARK! what hour can that be?”

The question came from Mrs. Crane. She had been dozing, and awoke with a start at the striking of the Widow Gould’s kitchen clock.

“It is eight, ma’am,” replied Judith from her seat near the bed.

“Eight! why, you told me the London train came in at seven.”

“To Great Wennock it does; or, rather, a quarter before it. The omnibus gets here about half-past seven. It is in, I know, ma’am, for I saw it taking a passenger through the town.

“Then where can she be?—the—the person I sent for yesterday,” returned Mrs. Crane in excitement; “she would get the letter this morning, and might have come off at once. You are sure you posted it in time last night, Judith?”

“Quite sure, ma’am; but there will be another train in late to-night.”

Mrs. Crane lay for a little time in thought. Pre-

sently she spoke again: "Judith, do you think my baby will live?"

"I don't see why it should not live, ma'am. It is certainly very little, but it seems quite healthy. I think it would have a better chance if you would nurse it, instead of letting it be brought up by hand."

"But I have told you I cannot," said Mrs. Crane, and the tone bore a peremptory sound. "It would not be convenient to me. Mrs. Smith will see all about it when she comes, and it is on his account, poor little fellow, that I am impatient for her. I am so pleased it's a boy."

"Ma'am, do you think you ought to talk so much?" asked Judith.

"Why should I not?" quickly returned the invalid. "I am as well as well can be: Mr. Stephen Grey said this afternoon he wished all his patients did as well as I am doing. Judith, I am glad I had Mr. Stephen Grey. What a kind man he is! He did nothing but cheer me up from first to last."

"I think that is the great secret why all Mr. Stephen's patients like him so much, observed Judith.

"I am sure I like him," was the lady's answer. "Mr. Carlton could not have done better for me than he has done."



The evening and night passed, bringing not the expected visitor, and the invalid began to display symptoms of restlessness. On the following morning Mrs. Smith arrived, having evidently travelled by the night-train. This was Sunday; the baby having been born early on the Saturday morning. At least, some one arrived; a hard-featured, middle-aged woman, who was supposed by the household to be the Mrs. Smith expected. Mrs. Crane did not say, and caused herself to be shut up with the stranger.

The sitting-room and bed-room, it has been remarked, communicated with each other. Each had also a door opening on to rather a spacious landing, spacious in proportion to the size of the house. At one end of this landing was a large window that looked out on the street; at the other end, opposite, was a closet, and the doors of the two rooms were on one side; the railings of the balustrades were opposite the doors. It is as well to explain this, as you will find later.

Mrs. Pepperfly and Judith sat in the front room, the sitting-room, the stranger being shut up with the invalid. Their voices could be heard in conversation, it almost seemed in dispute. Mrs. Smith's tones were full of what sounded like a mixture of lamentation, complaint, persuasion, remonstrance; and the sick lady's were angry and retorting. The

nurse was of a constitution to take things coolly, but Judith was apprehensive for the effect of the excitement on the invalid. Neither of them liked to interfere, Mrs. Crane having peremptorily ordered them not to disturb her with her friend. Suddenly the door between the two rooms was thrown open, and this friend appeared.

The nurse was lying back idly in her chair, jogging the infant on her lap with all the might of her two knees, after the approved nurse fashion ; Judith sat at the window, crimping a little cap border with a silver knife. Mrs. Smith, who had taken off neither bonnet nor shawl, caught up the child ; and carrying it to the window, examined its face attentively.

"It is not like *her*," she remarked to Judith, jerking her head in the direction of the bed-room.

"How can you judge yet awhile ?" asked Judith.  
"It's nothing but a poor little mite at present."

"Mite ? I never saw such a mite ! One can hardly believe such an atom could be endowed with life."

"You can't expect a child born before its time to be a giant," remarked Mrs. Pepperfly as she passed into the next room.

"Before its time, indeed !" irascibly echoed the stranger ; "what business had she to be exposing herself to railway jerks and shaking omnibuses ? Nasty dangerous things ! The jolts of that omnibus

sent me flying up to its top, and what must they have done by a slight young thing such as she is? Now, a mile of ruts to get over; now, a mile of flint stones! I think the commissioners of roads here must be all abed and asleep."

"People are continually talking of the badness of the road between this and the Great Wennock Station," observed Judith. "It is said that Mr. Carlton made a complaint to the authorities, telling them it was ruin to his horse and carriage to go over it. Then they had those flint stones laid down, and that has made it worse."

"Who's Mr. Carlton?"

"He is one of the medical gentlemen living down here."

"And why couldn't they attend to his complaint?"

"I suppose they did attend to it; they put the flint stones down in places afterwards, and they had done nothing to the road for years."

"What has this child been fed on?" demanded Mrs. Smith, abruptly quitting the unsatisfactory subject of the roads.

"Barley-water and milk, half and half," replied Judith. "It was a puzzle to Mrs. Pepperfly at first what to give it, as it's so small."

"I don't like the look of her," curtly returned the stranger, alluding to Mrs. Pepperfly.

"If we were all bought and sold by our looks, some of us would remain on hand, and she's one," said Judith. "But she has her wits about her; provided she keeps sober there's not a better nurse living, and when people know her failing they can guard against it."

"What are you? another nurse?"

"I am only a neighbour. But the lady took a fancy to me, and I said I would stop with her a few days. My home just now is at the next door, so I can run in and out. I am sure she is a lady," added Judith.

"She is a lady born and bred, but she took and married as—as I think she ought not to have married. But she won't hear a word said against him."

"Will he be coming here?" continued Judith.

"It's no business of mine whether he comes or not. They'll do as they please, I suppose. Where's this infant's things? They must be made into a bundle; and some food prepared for it."

"You are not going to take the baby away!" exclaimed Judith, looking all amazement.

"Indeed but I am. The trains don't run thick on a Sunday; but there's one leaves the station at seven, and I shall travel by it."

"And you are thinking to take this little mortal all the way to London?" said Judith, breathlessly.

"There's no reason why I shouldn't take it away, and there's a cause why I should," persisted Mrs. Smith; "whether it's to London, or whether it's elsewhere, is my affair. Wrapped in flannel and lying in my arms in a first-class carriage, it will take no more harm than in this room."

Judith felt that it was not her place to interfere with Mrs. Crane's arrangements, whatever they might be, or to put prying questions to the stranger before her, and she relapsed into silence.

"You were expected last night, ma'am," said Mrs. Pepperfly, returning to the room from the inner chamber.

"I dare say I was," was the curt answer. "But I couldn't come. I travelled all night to come as soon as I did."

"And you'll travel all night again to-night?" questioned the nurse.

"It won't kill me."

At that moment Mr. Stephen Grey's step was heard on the stairs. He went on at once to the bed-chamber by the direct door, not coming to the sitting-room. Mrs. Crane was flushed and feverish with excitement, and the surgeon saw it with surprise; he had left her so calm and well at his early visit that morning.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" he exclaimed.

"I feel a little hot," was the answer, given in a half-contrite tone, "it is nothing; it will soon go off. The person I told you of is come, and she—she—" Mrs. Crane paused for a minute and then went on—"she lectured me upon being so imprudent as to travel, and I got angry with her."

Mr. Stephen Grey looked vexed. "So sure as I have a patient going on unusually well, so sure does she go herself and upset it by some nonsensical folly or other. I will send you a composing draught; and now, my dear, understand me: I positively interdict all talking and excitement whatever for a day or two to come."

"Very well," she answered in a tone of acquiescence. "But let me ask you one thing—can I have the baby baptised?"

"Baptised! why should you wish it baptised? It is not ill."

"It is going away to-day to be nursed."

"Have you heard of a fit person to undertake it?" he rejoined, never supposing but the baby was to be sent to some one in the vicinity. "I wish you would nurse it yourself; better for you, and the child too."

"I told you that circumstances do not permit me to nurse it," was her answer; "and I am sure my husband would not be pleased if I did. I wish it to be baptised before it goes away; perhaps there

is some clergyman or curate in the town who would kindly come in and do it."

"I can arrange that," said Mr. Stephen. "Only you keep quiet. What is the young giant's name to be?"

"I must think of that," said Mrs. Crane.

However, later in the morning, when church was over, and the Reverend William Lycett, curate of St. Mark's, called to perform the rite, Judith went down to him and said that the sick lady had changed her mind with regard to having it baptised so soon, and was sorry to have troubled him. So Mr. Lycett, with a kind hope that both the lady and baby were going on satisfactorily, went away again. The event had caused quite a commotion in the little town, and its particulars were known from one end of it to the other.

The omnibus, so often referred to, allowed itself half an hour to start and jolt over the unpromising two miles of road. When ordered to do so, it would call for any passengers in South Wennock who might be going by it, and it was so ordered to call for Mrs. Smith. At a quarter past six,—for it liked to give itself plenty of time,—it drew up at Mrs. Gould's house in Palace Street, and Mrs. Smith stepped into it with two bundles: one bundle containing the baby, the other the baby's clothes.

It happened that she was the only passenger that Sunday evening; the omnibus, therefore, not having a full load, tore and jolted along to its heart's content, pretty nearly shaking Mrs. Smith to pieces. In vain, when she dared free a hand for a moment, did she hammer at the windows and the roof; but her hands had full occupation, the one taking care of the breathing bundle, the other clasping hold of the cushions, the woodwork, any part to steady herself. In vain she shrieked out to the driver that her brains were being shaken out of her, herself battered to atoms; the driver was a phlegmatic man and rarely paid attention to these complaints of his passengers. He knew, shaken or not, they must go by him, unless they had a private conveyance; and the knowledge made him independent. The consequence of all the speed and jolting on this particular evening was, that the omnibus arrived at the Great Wennock station unusually early, twenty minutes before the up-train would start, and five minutes before the down-train was expected in.

Mrs. Smith, vowing vengeance against the driver and the omnibus, declared she would lay a complaint, and bounced out to do so. But the clerk at the station—and there was only one on duty that Sunday evening, and he a very young man—aggravatingly laughed in Mrs. Smith's face at the



account she gave of her bruises, and said the omnibus had nothing to do with him. Mrs. Smith, overflowing with wrath, took herself and her bundles into the first-class waiting-room, and there sat down. The room opened on one side to the platform, and on the other to the road, lately the scene of Mrs. Smith's unpleasant journey.

Five minutes, and the down-train came steaming in. Some five or six passengers alighted, not more; the English as a nation do not prefer Sundays for making long journeys; and the train went steaming on again. The passengers all dispersed, save one; they belonged to Great Wennock; that one crossed the line when it was clear, and came into the waiting-room.

It was Mr. Carlton, the medical gentleman whom the sick lady had wished to employ. He was of middle height, slender, and looking younger than his years, which may have been seven or eight-and-twenty; his hair and complexion were fair, his eyes a light blue, his features regular. It was a well-looking face, but singularly impassive, and there was something in the expression of the thin and closely-compressed lips not pleasing to many an eye. Altogether his appearance was that of a gentleman in rather a remarkable degree.

Discerning some one sitting there in the dusky twilight,—for the station generally neglected to

light up its waiting-rooms on a Sunday night,—he lifted his hat momentarily, and walked straight across to the door of egress, where he stood gazing down the road. Nothing was to be seen save the omnibus drawn up close, its horses steaming still.

“Taylor,” said Mr. Carlton, as the railway clerk came out, whistling, and took a general view outside, having probably nothing else to do, “do you know whether my groom has been here with the carriage?”

“No, sir, not that I have seen; but we only opened the station five minutes ago.”

Mr. Carlton retraced his steps indoors, glancing keenly at the middle-aged woman seated there. She paid no attention to him; she was allowing her anger to effervesce. It was too dark for either to discern the features of the other; a loss not felt, as they were strangers. He went again to the door, propped himself against its post, and stood peering down the South Wennock road, softly whistling.

“Dobson,” he called out, as the driver of the omnibus came in sight to look after his patient horses, “did you see my servant anywhere as you came along? I sent him orders to be here to meet the train.”

“Naw sir,” I didn’t see nothing on him,” was

Dobson's reply. "Like to take advantage of the 'bus, sir?—it be a-going back empty."

"No, thank you," replied Mr. Carlton, some sarcasm in his tone. "You had the chance of bumping me to a jelly once; I don't intend to give it you a second time."

"That was afore I knowed who you was, sir. I don't bump our gentry. I takes care of my driving when I've got any of them inside."

"They may trust you if they will. If my carriage is not here shortly, I shall walk."

Dobson, seeing no chance of a customer, ascended to his seat, whipped up his horses, and set off home; his hat bobbing upwards with his speed, and his omnibus flying behind him.

By this time it wanted ten minutes to seven: the period, as Mrs. Smith had been informed, when she could get her ticket. She deposited the live bundle at the very back of the wide sofa, and went to procure it. Mr. Carlton turned in at the door again, whistling still, when a faint, feeble cry was heard to proceed from the sofa.

It brought him and his whistling to a stand-still. He stood looking at the sofa, wondering whether his ears had deceived him. The cry was repeated.

"Why, bless my heart, if I don't believe it is a child!" he exclaimed.

Approaching the sofa, he dived into the wrap-

pings and flannels, and felt something warm and soft. He could not see; the obscurity was too great, although a distant lamp from the platform shed its rays partially in. Mr. Carlton drew some wax matches from his pocket; struck one, and held its light over the face of the child. He had rarely in his life seen so small a one, and the little thing began to cry as Mrs. Smith came in.

"So you have woke up, have you!" cried she. "It's an odd thing to me that you could sleep through the doings of that wicked omnibus. Come along, baby; five minutes yet before we get into the train."

"I thought magic must be at work, to hear a human cry from what looked like a packet of clothes," said Mr. Carlton. "I lighted a match to make sure whether it was a child or a rabbit."

"It is as much like a rabbit as a child yet, poor little thing; I never saw such a baby born."

"It is not at its full time," observed Mr. Carlton.

"Full time!" repeated Mrs. Smith, who had by no means recovered the equanimity that had been shaken out of her, and resented the remark as an offence. "Who are you, young man, that you should offer your opinion to me? What do you know of infants, pray?"

"At least as much as you, my good lady," was

the answer, given with unruffled equanimity. "I have brought plenty of them into the world."

"Oh, then, you are a doctor, I suppose," she said, somewhat mollified.

"Yes, I am a doctor; and, as a doctor, I will tell you that little specimen of humanity is not fit to travel."

"I don't say it is; but necessity has to do many things without reference to fitness.

"When was it born?"

"Yesterday morning. Sir, have you any influence in this neighbourhood?"

"Why do you ask?" returned Mr. Carlton.

"Because, if you have, I hope you will use it to put down that dangerous omnibus. The way it jolts and rattles over the road is enough to kill any body who's inside of it. I went by it to South Wennock this morning, and that was bad enough, as the other passengers could testify; but in coming back by it this evening I did really think I should have lost my life. Jolting one's head up to the roof, taking one's feet off the floor, jolting one's body against the sides and seat! I shall be sore all over for a week to come; and the more I knocked and called, the faster the sinner drove. And I with this baby to protect all the while."

"It is a shame," replied Mr. Carlton. "What surprises me is, that South Wennock does not rise

against it. There'll be some serious result one of these days, and then it will be altered."

"The serious result has come," wrathfully returned Mrs. Smith. "A young lady, hardly fit to travel in an easy carriage, went in the omnibus to South Wrenock last Friday, and the consequence was the birth of this poor little infant."

"Indeed! And what of her?"

"Well, she is going on all right, as it happens; but it might have been just the other way, you know."

Mr. Carlton nodded. "One of the Messrs. Grey's patients, I suppose? Was it young Mrs. Lipscome of the Rise?"

"No, it was not, sir; and who it was don't matter. Whether it was a lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria or a poor peasant girl, the injury's the same. And much that rascally omnibus cares!"

"Now then! Take seats for the up-train," cried a man, thrusting in his head.

Mrs. Smith gathered her two bundles together, and went out. And Mr. Carlton crossed to the other door, for his ear had caught the sound of carriage wheels in the distance.

## CHAPTER IV.

### AN ACCIDENT.

DASHING up with the speed of the omnibus came an open carriage, driven by a servant in livery. The man was the same who had been so supercilious to Judith Ford at Mr. Carlton's residence ; the carriage, a light, elegant vehicle, was the same spoken of by Mrs. Gould as the "cabrioily."

Mr. Carlton stepped out of the station as it stopped, and peered at his servant, as well as the dusky night would permit. The man had transgressed against the rules of sobriety once or twice, and his master suspected the delay might have had its rise in the same cause now. But he seemed sober enough as he jumped down.

"What were the orders you received, Evan?"

"I'm very sorry to be late, sir; I can't in the least make out how it was," was the deprecating answer. "When I met the omnibus a-coming back, sir, I'm sure you might have knocked me down with a feather. I know I started in time, and——"

“No lie, Evan,” quietly interrupted Mr. Carlton.  
“You know you did *not* start in time.”

He motioned the man round to the other side, ascending himself to the driver's seat. It was not often Mr. Carlton took the reins; perhaps he still doubted his servant's perfect sobriety on this night.

“You have not got the lamps lighted.”

“No, sir, I thought they'd not be wanted. And they wouldn't be, neither, but for them clouds as is obscuring of the moon.”

Mr. Carlton drove off. Not quite with the reckless speed that characterised the omnibus, but pretty fast. The light carriage had good springs; those of the omnibus had probably been gone long ago. There was one smooth bit of road about midway between the two towns, and they had reached this, and were bowling along quickly, when, without any warning, the horse started violently and fell. Mr. Carlton and his man were both thrown out, and the shafts of the carriage were broken.

It was the work of an instant. One moment spinning along the road; the next, lying on it. Mr. Carlton was the first to rise. He was certainly shaken, and one of his legs seemed not quite free from pain; but there was no material damage. What had made the horse start he could not imagine; there was nothing to cause it, so far as he could see. Mr. Carlton went to his head and strove



to raise him, but it was more than he could accomplish.

"Evan," he called out.

There was no reply. Mr. Carlton turned to look for his man, and found him lying without motion on the ground. Evan appeared to be senseless.

"Well, this is a pretty state of things!" cried the surgeon aloud.

"What's the to-do? What's up?" exclaimed a voice in the rear. It came from a peasant woman who was approaching a gate that led to a roadside field. And at that moment the moon came out from behind its obscuring clouds, and threw its light upon the scene.

"Are there any men about?" asked Mr. Carlton.  
"I must have help."

She shook her head. "There's nobody about but me: my husband"—pointing to a hut just inside the gate—"is down with fever. Did the horse fall? Why—goodness save us! There's a man a-lying there!"

"I must have help," repeated Mr. Carlton.  
"Neither man nor horse can lie here."

The woman stooped over the horse. "I don't think he's much hurt," she said, after touching the animal here and there. "Some of them horses be as obstinate as mules after a fall, and *won't* get up

till it suits 'em to do it. May-be one of his legs be sprained. What caused it, sir?"

"That's more than I know," was the surgeon's answer. "He was always sure-footed until to-night. His falling is to me perfectly inexplicable."

The woman seemed to muse. She had left the horse, and was now regarding Evan. The man lay quite still, and she raised herself again.

"I don't like them unaccountable accidents," she observed in a dreamy tone: "them accidents that come, and nobody can tell why. They bode ill luck."

"They bring ill luck enough, without boding it," returned Mr. Carlton.

"They bode it too," said the woman, with a nod of the head. "Take care, sir, that no ill happens to you in the next few hours or few days."

"What ill should happen to me?" asked Mr. Carlton, smiling inwardly at the woman's superstition.

"We can none of us tell beforehand, sir, what the ill hanging over us may be, or from what quarter it will come," was the answer. "Perhaps you were going a journey?—I don't know, sir, of course—or who you may be; but if you were, I should say halt in it, and turn aside from the road you were bound for."

"My good woman, I do think you must be out of your mind!" exclaimed Mr. Carlton.

"No, I am not, sir: but perhaps I have observed more, and keener, than most folks do. I'm certain—I'm convinced by experience, that many of these accidents, these hindrances, are only warnings—if we was but wise enough to take 'em as such. You, now, sir, were on your road to some place——"

"To South Wennock, a mile off," interrupted Mr. Carlton, some satire in his tone.

"South Wennock; so be it, sir. Then what I'd say is, was I you I'd not go on to South Wennock: I'd rather turn myself round and go back whence I came. This may be sent as a warning to stop your journey there."

But for the untoward and vexatious circumstances around him, the surgeon would have laughed outright. "Why, I live at South Wennock," he exclaimed, raising his head from his man-servant, over whom it had been again bent. "But the question now is, not what luck, good or ill, may be in store for me," he added, turning to the horse, "but where and how I can get assistance. Here's a helpless horse, and there's a helpless man. First of all, can you bring me a little water."

She went away without a word, and brought a brown pitcher full of it, and a small cup. Mr. Carlton took them from her.

"And now can you go to the Red Lion at South Wennock, and tell them to send the necessary aid?"

"I'm willing, sir. My husband won't take no harm at being left: though it's mighty ill he is."

"Who attends him?"

"I've had nobody to him as yet. We poor folks can't afford a doctor till things come to the very worst with us, and life's a'most on the ebb."

"Which is unwise policy of you," remarked Mr. Carlton. "Well, my good woman, you do this little service for me, and I'll step in as soon as you bring assistance, and see what I can do for your husband."

"Are you a doctor, sir?"

"I am. Let Mrs. Fitch send an easy carriage: and a couple of men had better come with it. But, I think as you do, that my horse is lying there in temper more than in real hurt."

"Is *he* hurt, sir, do you think?" she asked, pointing to the man.

"I think he is only stunned. Make the best of your way for this help, there's a good soul. Tell Mrs. Fitch it is for Mr. Carlton."

The woman, strong and sturdy, strode away with a will that Mr. Carlton himself could not have surpassed, and was back again with all requisite aid, in a short space of time. Mr. Carlton had got his

horse up then. It appeared to have sprained its leg, but to have received no other damage. Evan was still unconscious. The surgeon snatched a moment to go in and look at the woman's husband, whom he found suffering from low fever. He told her if she would come to his house the following morning, he would give her certain medicines suitable for him.

Great commotion the damaged procession caused when it made its entry into South Wennock; greater commotion still at the dwelling of Mr. Carlton. The horse was led round to the stable and a veterinary surgeon sent for, and Mr. Carlton himself attended to his man. Evan had recovered consciousness during the journey, and his master found his injuries were but slight.

Mr. Carlton had remembered the value of *appearance* when he took this house,—one of more pretension than a young surgeon need have entered upon. On either side the entrance was a sitting-room: a rather fine staircase led above to a handsome drawing-room, and to spacious bed-rooms. The drawing-room and some of the bed-rooms were not furnished; but there was plenty of time for that.

Evan attended to, Mr. Carlton went down to the hall, and turned into the sitting-room on his left hand, generally called the dining-room. It had

two windows—the one looking to the front; the other, a large, low, bay window, looking on the garden, at the side of the house. Both the windows had the blinds drawn now, and the room was only lighted by a fire. Mr. Carlton gave it a vigorous poke to stir it into a blaze, and rang the bell.

It was answered by a maid-servant, a respectable woman of middle age. This woman, Evan the groom, and a boy, comprised the household. The boy's work was to carry out the medicines, and to stop in the surgery and answer callers at other times.

"I want Ben, Hannah."

"Yes, sir; I'll send him in. You'll take something to eat, won't you, sir?"

"I should like something; I have had nothing since breakfast this morning. What have you in the house?"

"There's cold beef, sir, and there's——"

"That will do," interrupted Mr. Carlton; "the cold beef. Send Ben here."

Ben made his appearance: the same young gentleman who had been insolent to Judith Ford on the Friday evening. He stood before his master the very picture of humility.

"Any messages or letters for me, Ben?"

"There haven't been any letters, sir," was Ben's answer. "Two or three folks have been in to see

you, but they went away again when they found you were out. And there came a message yesterday from Captain Chesney, sir, and another from him this morning. He was worsser, the black man said, and in a dreadful way at your being away ; and he telled the man to say, that if you weren't with him to-day, he should call in Mr. Grey."

"He may call in the deuce if he likes," was Mr. Carlton's answer, spoken in momentary irritation. "Is that all, Ben ?"

"It's all, sir."

Ben might have said with more correctness, all that he remembered. He withdrew, and Mr. Carlton stood a moment in thought. Then he went to the hall and caught up his hat, just as Hannah was coming from the kitchen at the back with a tray in her hand. She looked surprised to see her master going out, thinking he was waiting to take the refreshment.

"When I come back," he said to her. "You can put it ready."

He took his way to the Rise, intending to pay a visit to the gentleman who had sent the irritable messages, Captain Chesney. Some doctors might not have been so ready to go off at an inconvenience to a patient, whom they knew perfectly well to be in no sort of danger : Mr. Carlton himself would certainly not, for his disposition was more of a

haughty than a complaisant one ; but he was swayed by a different motive from any connected with his profession.

About three months previously, Captain Chesney, a post-captain on half-pay, had settled at South Wennock, removing to it from the neighbourhood of Plymouth. The house he took was called Cedar Lodge, a small white villa, standing back from the high road amidst a wilderness of a garden. Not that it deserved the name, "wilderness," from being badly kept, but on account of the thick shrubs and trees that crowded it. It was excellently kept ; for the old naval captain was a precise man, and would insist on things being neat and nice about him, however short the money might run that kept them so. Like many another captain in our navy, his means were at all times lamentably low.

The captain had three daughters, Jane, Laura, and Lucy. There was a wide difference in their ages : as is frequently the case when the father of a family serves his country, whether by sea or by land, and his absences from home are of long duration : but there's no time to notice these young ladies yet, and their turn will come.

Labouring under frequent attacks of gout, Captain Chesney's naturally hot temper had grown irritable and more irritable. The gout perhaps was the chief cause : certainly the irritability was much more



marked when the gout was upon him. Accident had led to his calling in Mr. Carlton. When the captain first arrived at South Wennock, he was suffering, and he sent out his black servant, Pompey, an attached man who had been with him for years, to "bring back a doctor." Pompey, a stranger to the place, made his inquiries and arrived at the house of Mr. Grey. Mr. Grey and Mr. Stephen were both out; but their assistant promised Pompey that one of them should attend before the day closed; and it was then late in the afternoon. Pompey went back with the message, and it put the captain into one of his fits of irritation. A doctor he wanted at once, and a doctor he'd have: and Pompey was ordered out again to find another. He went direct to Mr. Carlton's, having noted the plate upon the door in returning from Mr. Grey's: "Mr. Lewis Carlton, Consulting Surgeon." Mr. Carlton was at home, and from that hour to this had attended Captain Chesney. The captain during the winter had had attack upon attack, and Mr. Carlton had been in the house most days; had become, so to say, intimate with the family.

Mr. Carlton proceeded up the Rise. Captain Chesney's house was on the right, about half-way up the hill. Opening the gate, a winding path between the thick trees took him to the house door; and it was only through that path that a glimpse of

the road could be caught from the lower windows. Before those windows was a sloping green lawn, to which they opened ; and a flower garden lay on the side of the house. It was a pretty place, though small ; in every way, save for its size, fitted for the abode of a gentleman.

Mr. Carlton glanced at the sitting-room windows, and saw a faint glimmer of fire. But a bright light burnt in the room above, the chamber of Captain Chesney.

"Not home from church yet," murmured Mr. Carlton to himself, as he rang the bell. "Miss Chesney generally goes to that late one at the other end of the town. I wonder if—all—are gone?"

The honest black face of Pompey shone with delight when he saw who was the visitor. "Massa had been talking, only then, of sending him off for the other doctor, Mr. Grey," he whispered ; and Mr. Carlton with a haughty throw-back of his own head as he heard it,—for, somewhat curious to say, this irritation on the part of his patient tended to render *him* irritable,—stepped up-stairs to the captain's room.

The captain was in bed. Mr. Carlton had just brought him through one of his worst attacks of gout, and he was really progressing towards convalescence as fast as he possibly could. There was no need whatever for Mr. Carlton or any other

doctor to visit him ; but it was always during the period of recovery that Captain Chesney was most impatient and irritable. He was a short man, as are most sailors, with a pair of brilliant brown eyes, overhanging grey eyebrows, and grey hair. The daughter who was sitting with him, Laura Chesney, and whom he dispatched from the room when he heard the step of the surgeon, had just such eyes, as brilliant and as beautiful.

Mr. Carlton took his seat between the bed and the fire, facing Captain Chesney: and he waited until that gentleman's explosive anger should be over, before he proceeded to question his patient professionally.

"I could not help myself, Captain Chesney," he quietly said when there was a lull in the storm; and it may be remarked that in the presence of the captain, Mr. Carlton retained his own personal suavity unruffled, however provoking the captain's tongue might be. "I received a telegraphic message from my father, desiring me to go to town without a moment's delay if I wished to see him alive. The hasty note I sent to you explained this."

"And I might have died!" growled the captain.

"Pardon me, sir. Far from dying, I knew you were not in the least danger. Had you been so in

ever so slight a degree, I should have requested one of the Messrs. Grey to attend you for me."

"Had you not come in to-night I should have sent for them myself," retorted the captain. "It's monstrous to suppose I am to lie here in this pain with no doctor to come near me."

"But, Captain Chesney, I feel sure the pain is nothing like what it has been. Have you not been up to-day?"

"No, I have not been up. And I don't choose to get up," added the irritable captain.

"Well, we will have you up to-morrow, and you will be all the better for it," said the surgeon soothingly.

"Ugh!" grunted the captain. "Did you find your father dead?"

"No. I am glad to say I found him a trifle better than he had been when they telegraphed for me. But his life, I think, cannot be much prolonged. The obligation to attend his summons promptly; to see him, if possible, before death, lay urgently upon me, Captain Chesney; for he and I had been at variance," continued Mr. Carlton, vouchsafing a piece of confidence into which he was rarely betrayed.

It was nothing to Captain Chesney. His medical attendant was his medical attendant, and nothing

else; none less likely than the haughty old man to make of him even a temporary friend.

"He has not been a good father to me," resumed the surgeon, looking dreamily into the fire. "Anything but that. And I lost my mother when I was an infant. But for that loss I might be different from what I am."

"Men in this life are mostly what their own actions make them, sir; without reference to their father and mother," returned the captain in a hard tone.

"Ah," said Mr. Carlton. "But I meant with regard to happiness. You don't know what my childhood and youth were—wanting my mother. Had she lived, it would have been so different."

"Is your father a poor man?" asked the captain, taking a momentary interest in the question.

"Oh dear no. He is a rich one. And I"—Mr. Carlton suddenly laid pointed emphasis on the words—"am his only son, his only child."

"I think that physic ought to be changed."

The remark recalled Mr. Carlton to the present. He stood up, reached the medicine bottle pointed to by Captain Chesney, and was the composed professional attendant again. A very few minutes, and the visit ceased.

As Mr. Carlton left the chamber, the captain caught hold of the silken ribbon tied to his bed-

stead, that communicated with the bell-rope, and rang a peal loud enough to awaken the seven sleepers. It was for Pompey to show the doctor out; and Pompey generally was favoured with this sort of peal.

Mr. Carlton closed the bed-room door, stepped along the corridor, and met a girl, young and beautiful, who appeared at the door of another room. It was Laura Chesney, and her luminous dark eyes were raised to Mr. Carlton as he took her hand, and then were dropped behind the dark lashes which closed on her hot cheek.

A hot cheek then; a cheek like a burning rose. That *his* presence called those blushes up, none could doubt; and in Mr. Carlton's low tones, as he addressed her, there was a trembling tenderness which told its own tale. Never man loved woman more passionately than he, the surgeon, had learnt to love Laura Chesney.

"Oh, Laura! I did not expect this. I thought you were out."

"No. Jane and Lucy went to church, but I stayed with papa. When did you return?" she softly whispered.

"To-night only. Laura!" he continued, his tone one of wild fervour, "to meet you thus, unlooked-for, seems like a sudden glimpse of heaven."

One lingering pressure of the hands, and then Mr. Carlton was on his way down again, for Pompey had appeared on the scene. Laura listened for the closing of the hall door; for the last echoes of the footfalls on the gravel-path, footfalls that for her ear were as the very sweetest music; and when they had died away to silence, she heaved a sobbing sigh, born of intense emotion, and stepped on to her father's room.

Just as Mr. Carlton had gone through the gate, two ladies came up to it—or, rather, a lady and a little girl. He was passing them with merely a word of salutation, a lift of the hat, when the lady stopped, and addressed him in low and gentle tones.

"You are back then, Mr. Carlton. Have you seen papa?"

"I have been paying him a visit now, Miss Chesney. He is very considerably better. The pain has not gone, but I am sure it is nothing like what it was, even when I left. A day or two, and he will, I hope, be down-stairs again."

The little girl came round to him with a dancing step. "Mr. Carlton, I want you to get papa well soon. He has promised to take me out for a whole day's holiday as soon as he is well."

"Very well, Miss Lucy," answered the surgeon, in a merry tone. "I'll get him well with all due speed, for the sake of your whole day's holiday."

Good night, young lady ; good night, Miss Chesney."

He held the gate open for them to pass through, lifted his hat again, closed the gate after them, and went on down the road. The moon had grown brilliantly bright, and he glanced up at it. Not in reality to look at it, for he had plunged into deep thought. The few words he had spoken to Captain Chesney had brought vividly before him his past life ; its good and ill doings, its discomforts, its recklessness, its sins. His father, who was in the same profession as himself, a surgeon, in large practice in a populous but not desirable quarter of London, lying eastward, had been rather given to sins and recklessness himself, and no good example had ever been placed before the boy, Lewis. Had his mother lived, as he remarked to Captain Chesney, things would have been widely different. Allowed to have his own way in childhood, allowed to have it in youth and in early manhood, insomuch as that no control or supervision was exercised over him, no fatherly guidance was extended to him, it was little wonder that he got into various dangers and difficulties ; and, as a sequence, into displeasure with his father. When an array of debts was brought home to stare old Mr. Carlton in the face, he flew into a terrible passion, and swore that he would not pay them. A half peace was patched up



after a while; the debts were settled, and Mr. Carlton the younger established himself at South Wennock: but the father and son still continued much at variance, no cordiality existing between them. Now the thing was altered. Mr. Carlton senior on a bed of sickness was quite a different man from Mr. Carlton in rude health, and he had allowed himself to be fully reconciled to his son. He had shown him his will, in which he, Lewis, was named sole heir; and he had hinted at the good round sum laid by in bank securities. And Mr. Carlton stepped on now, dreaming a glowing dream; a dream that had become the one wild hope of his life—a marriage with Laura Chesney.

His supper was laid ready when he got home. Before sitting down to it, he drew three or four letters from his pocket, took them from the envelopes, and began to look over them as if for the purpose of sorting.

"I must keep that," he said to himself, as he glanced down the writing of the one and replaced it in its envelope; "these I suppose may be burnt. Stay, though—I'll have my supper first."

He sat down before the tray and cut himself some meat. Barely had he begun to eat it, when Ben came in with a face of contrition, holding a note in his hand.

"What now, boy?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"I am sorry I forgot it, sir, when you asked me. I put it in the letter-rack in the surgery, and it clean slipped my memory. It was brought here, sir, the same night that you went away."

Mr. Carlton, laying down his knife and fork, opened the note and ran his eyes over its contents. Ben, who had gone away, heard his master shouting to him,—

"Come back, sir! Who brought this?"

Ben could not tell who brought it: except that it was a woman with a big bonnet on; a bonnet as big as a house.

Mr. Carlton read the note again, read it attentively. Then he rose, hastily sorted the letters on the table, putting aside the one which he wished to preserve, and throwing the rest indiscriminately into the fire. "I'll take this down at once and then it will be safe," he said to himself, alluding to the letter he had preserved. "If I don't keep it as a proof, the old man, when he gets well, may be for saying that he never wrote it."

The "old man" thus somewhat irreverently alluded to, was Mr. Carlton's father. Mr. Carlton carried the letter down-stairs to a private safe and locked it up. When he returned to the sitting-room he put his hand in his pocket for the note just brought to him by his servant-boy, and could not find it. It was not in any of his pockets, it was not

on the table ; and Mr. Carlton came to the conclusion that he had burnt it with the rest.

“How stupid I am !” he exclaimed. “What was the number, now ? Thirteen, I think. Thirteen, Palace Street. Yes, that was it.”

He passed into the hall without further delay, put on his hat, and left the house. Hannah heard him, and went into the parlour to remove the tray.

“I never see such patients as his !” she exclaimed wrathfully, when she found her master's supper had been interrupted midway. “They can't even let him get his meals in peace.”

## CHAPTER V.

### MR. CARLTON'S VISIT.

THE moon shone brightly on the long street of South Wennock, as Mr. Carlton the surgeon stepped along it with a fleet foot. He was on his way to the house in Palace Street, number thirteen.

The widow herself came to the door in answer to his ring. She dropped a curtsey when she saw who stood there.

"Is this Mrs. Gould's?"

"Yes, sir; if you please, sir. I am Mrs. Gould, sir."

"I have just opened a note, on my return from London; one that was left at my house a day or two ago; requesting me to call here to see a patient," said Mr. Carlton. "A Mrs.—Mrs.——"

"Mrs. Crane, sir," said the widow, supplying the name for which Mr. Carlton appeared at fault. "It's all happily over, sir, and she is doing well."

Mr. Carlton stared at her as if he were thunder-struck. "Over!" he repeated. "Happily over!"

Why she—I understood—if I read her note aright—did not expect it for two months to come!”

“No more she didn’t, sir, and it was all that omnibus’s doings. It pretty near shook the life out of her.”

“Omnibus!” he returned, seeming completely at sea. “What omnibus? what are you talking of?”

“Perhaps you don’t know the circumstances yet, sir,” returned the widow. “The lady arrived here from London, sir, a stranger, and was recommended by Mrs. Fitch to my apartments. So young, she looked, quite a girl——”

“But about her illness?” interposed Mr. Carlton, whose time was being wasted.

“I was coming to it, sir. Afore she had well done her tea that same evening, she got ill: the omnibus had shook her frightfully, she said—and you know what that omnibus is yourself, sir. Instead of getting better she got worse, and early the next morning the baby was born. Such a mite of a baby, sir!” added Mrs. Gould in a confidential tone. “I have seen many a wax-doll bigger. Some person came down from London this morning and took it away.”

A conviction came into the surgeon’s mind that the mite of a baby he had seen at Great Wennock station, that evening, must be the one in question. “Who attended?” he inquired.

"Mr. Stephen Grey. But he only attended for you, sir, I believe, as the lady wished to have you. She had been recommended to you."

"Recommended to me!"

"Well, yes, sir; we understood her to say so. She'll explain to you herself, no doubt. Of course, we can't but think the circumstances altogether are somewhat strange."

"Is she doing well?"

"Couldn't be doing better. Will you walk up, sir?"

The colloquy had taken place at the open door; the widow standing inside, Mr. Carlton out. He made a movement to enter, but stopped in hesitation.

"It is late to disturb her to-night. She may be asleep."

"She is not asleep, sir. Leastways she wasn't five minutes ago, when I went up to get Pepperfly down to her supper, which she's now having with me in the kitchen. I daresay she'd like you to go up, sir, and to know that you are back again."

He went in, and laid his hat on the stand that stood in the passage. Mrs. Gould ran briskly towards the kitchen.

"Just one moment, sir, while I get a light, for there's none up-stairs," she said, in a tone of apology for leaving him waiting. "When the nurse came

down Mrs. Crane sent the candle away by her, saying she'd rather be without it."

Passing the parlour door and the room behind it—which room was a bed-chamber, and Mrs. Gould took the opportunity of sleeping in it when her permanent lodger was absent—she tripped into the kitchen, a very small apartment built out at the back, seized the candle on the table, by the light from which Mrs. Pepperfly was eating her supper, unceremoniously left that lady in the dark, and was back in an instant to marshal Mr. Carlton up the stairs. Arrived at the door of the sitting room, he took the light from her hand.

"That will do, thank you, Mrs. Gould," he said, sinking his voice to a whisper. "I had better go in alone. She may have dropped asleep."

Mrs. Gould was nothing loth to be dismissed. She had been disturbed at her supper, and was glad to return to it. In consequence of her having gone to church that evening, the meal was being taken later than usual. She closed the door on Mr. Carlton, leaving him alone.

He passed through the sitting-room, softly opened the door of the bed-chamber and entered it, shading the light with his hand. The chamber was quite still, and he believed Mrs. Crane to be alone. In point of fact, however, Judith was sitting at the extreme end of it, behind the bed-curtains, which

were drawn round that side of the bed and at the foot. Quiet as his movements were, they awoke Mrs. Crane, who had fallen into a doze, and she looked round with a start, and raised her head—as we are all apt to do when suddenly awakened, especially in illness.

Mr. Carlton put down the light on a table by the door, approached the bed, and addressed her. But ere he had said many words or she had scarcely responded, a sound, as of a rustling movement on the other side of the bed, caught his ear.

“What is that?” he abruptly called out.

“What is what?” repeated the invalid, whose ears had not been so quick as his own.

Mr. Carlton stepped round the bed. “Is any one here?” he asked.

There appeared to be no one, for the question elicited neither sound nor answer. Sufficient light came from the candle to enable him to discern a second door on that side. He drew it open: it was pushed to, but not latched, and the moonlight streamed full upon the landing from the staircase window. But Mr. Carlton could neither see nor hear any one, and he came to the conclusion that he had been mistaken.

“I thought I heard some one in the room,” he said, in a tone of apology, as he returned to the chamber.



"Indeed there is no one here," said the sick lady. "The nurse went down to her supper. It must have been in the next house: we hear the noises there nearly as plainly as though they were in this."

"That was it, then," said Mr. Carlton.

You will be at no loss, however, to understand that the noise had been caused by Judith. Finding it was Mr. Carlton who had entered, and not deeming it right to make a third at an interview between a doctor and his patient, she had hastened to escape through the half-opened door, near to which she was sitting. Her slippers were entirely of list—for Judith Ford had been furnished with all the requisites for a sick-room in her last place—and the stairs were carpeted, and she ran swiftly and silently down them, unconscious of the commotion she had so innocently caused. Mrs. Crane had not known she was there; in fact, it was but a minute or two previously that Judith had entered. She, Judith, made her way to the kitchen, where Mrs. Gould and the nurse were in the full enjoyment of cold boiled bacon and pickled onions, by the light of a fresh candle.

"Where on earth did you spring from?" exclaimed the widow.

"From up-stairs," replied Judith.

"I never heard you come in. I thought you were

keeping house next door, while your sister had her Sunday evening out."

"So I was, but Margaret has come home now, and I just stepped in to see if I could do anything. I saw you two were at supper as I passed the window, and didn't disturb you. Mrs. Crane was asleep, however, when I got up-stairs, and Mr. Carlton has come in now."

"I say, Judith," cried the widow eagerly, "did Mr. Carlton say anything to you about the accident?"

"Mr. Carlton did not say anything to me at all. He did not see me. As soon as I knew who had come in, I stole away quietly. What accident?"

"There has been a shocking accident to-night, to him and his carriage. They were talking about it in the bar, at the Cross-Keys, when I went for our supper beer."

"An accident to Mr. Carlton?"

Mrs. Gould nodded. She had just taken a large onion in her mouth, and could not make it convenient to speak immediately.

"It happened as he was coming from Great Wenlock, where his servant had took his carriage to meet him at the train," she presently resumed. "The carriage was overturned and smashed to pieces, and his horse and servant were both killed."

"How dreadful!" involuntarily spoke Judith.

"I was just telling Mrs. Pepperfly of it, when the ring came to the door, and I assure you, Judy, when I opened it and saw Mr. Carlton himself standing there, it did give me a turn. Me and Mrs. Pepperfly had been wondering whether he wasn't killed too—for nobody seemed to know how it was with him at the Cross-Keys—and there stood he! I couldn't make bold to ask questions, for he has the character of being one of them proud men that won't brook none. At any rate he's not dead. I say, Mrs. Pepperfly, don't you think you ought to go upstairs while he's there?"

Mrs. Pepperfly, fond of her supper at least in an equal degree with the widow, resented the suggestion, and held up her plate, in a defiant spirit, for some more bacon.

"If he wants me he can ring for me," was her answer, curtly delivered. "How is your face to-night, Judith?"

"Well, it has been very painful all the evening. I think I shall go home and get to bed," continued Judith. "It may become easier there."

She did not linger, but bade them good-night and hastened away. She had suffered much from tooth-ache or face-ache the last day or two. Mrs. Pepperfly and the widow sat on at their supper, until disturbed by the departure of Mr. Carlton. He had not remained long.

"She'll do well, sir?" said Mrs. Gould, as she opened the street-door.

"Very well indeed; quite well," replied Mr Carlton. "Good night."

Of course tales never lose by carrying, especially if they are bad ones; and that you all know. The current report of the accident in South Wennock that night was precisely the one mentioned by Mrs. Gould—that Mr. Carlton's carriage was smashed to pieces, and his horse and man were killed. On the following morning, however, things were found to be looking a little brighter; the groom, under his master's treatment, was progressing quickly towards recovery, the horse's sprain was going on well, and the carriage had gone to the coachmaker's to be repaired.

Mr. Carlton had to make his visits on foot that day. Towards the middle of it, in passing through High Street, he encountered Mr. Stephen Grey. The two had never met professionally, but they knew each other sufficiently well to nod in passing. Mr. John Grey had more than once been in attendance in conjunction with Mr. Carlton, but it happened that Mr. Stephen had not. Each stopped simultaneously now.

As Mr. Stephen Grey had remarked casually to Judith the previous Friday, there was plenty of room for Mr. Carlton in South Wennock as well as

for themselves. Indeed, the death of their brother Robert, combined with the increasing size of the place, had caused the practice to be more than John and Stephen Grey and their assistant could manage, therefore they felt not a shade of jealousy of the new surgeon, who had come to set up amidst them. Honourable, fair-dealing, right-minded men were the brothers Grey, entirely above rankling spite and petty meanness.

Mr. Stephen Grey had halted to speak of Mrs. Crane. He had been happy to attend her, he said, and would now resign her into the hands of Mr. Carlton.

"She is doing quite well," remarked Mr. Carlton.

"Quite so," said Mr. Stephen Grey, who had taken the remark as a question. "I have not long come from her. If you will step down there with me now, I will explain matters, and——"

"Would you oblige me by not giving up charge until to-night or to-morrow morning?" interrupted Mr. Carlton. "What with the confusion caused by last night's accident, and the patients who have grown impatient at my absence, and are exacting double attention, I am so busy to-day that I don't know which way to turn. Before I take Mrs.—Mrs. What's the name?"

"Crane."

"Mrs. Crane. It is not a difficult name to

remember, and yet it seems to slip from me. Before I take her from your hands I should wish to meet you there, just for explanation, and I have really not time for it now. When I reached home last evening and read the note she had sent to me on Friday last, I went to call, but it was late; she seemed drowsy, and I did not undertake charge. Either to-night or to morrow-morning, Mr. Grey, I shall have the pleasure of meeting you."

"Whichever may be convenient to you," returned Mr. Stephen. "It's quite the same to me."

"To-night, then, at seven," said Mr. Carlton. "If I find that I cannot by any possibility get there"—he paused in consideration—"why then, it must be left until to-morrow morning, at ten. But I hope I shall be there this evening. She seems young, this lady."

"Quite young. She says she's two-and-twenty, but I should not have thought her so much. How did you manage to meet with that unpleasant accident?"

"I don't know any more than you know, who were not present. I fancied the horse shied; but it all happened so swiftly I could not be sure. If he did shy, it was very slightly, and I saw nothing that could have induced it; but why he should have fallen, or over what, is entirely unexplainable. It was on that smooth bit of road; the only smooth

bit there is, midway between here and Great Wen-nock. Evan is doing well, and as to the horse, he is very slightly injured."

"The report in the town was, that you were all done for, all killed together; you, the groom, horse, phaeton, and all."

Mr. Carlton laughed. It was difficult to resist the good-humour of Mr. Stephen Grey. And so they parted, each walking a different way.

## CHAPTER VI.

### WAS THE HOUSE HAUNTED ?

AT seven precisely that evening Stephen Grey went to Mrs. Crane's, to wait for Mr. Carlton. Mrs. Crane was flushed, and appeared to be a little feverish.

"There has been too much chattering going on," he observed to Judith, who was sitting in the front room.

"She will talk, sir," answered Judith. "Feeling well, as she does, I suppose it's natural."

"But not expedient," he returned. "Where's the nurse?"

"She was here not two minutes before you came in, sir. Perhaps she's gone down to get something."

Mr. Stephen rang the bell, and the nurse was heard puffing up in answer. She was sure to puff when going up-stairs, however slow her pace might be.

"Mrs. Pepperfly, how's this? You have allowed your charge to talk too much."



"Well, sir, and she will talk," was Mrs. Pepperfly's answer, nearly the same as the one given by Judith. "She's all right, sir; a little hot maybe to-night; but it's no harm: she's too young and healthy for harm to come anigh her, through a bit of talking."

"I'll not have her talk until she is stronger," said Mr. Stephen. "You must stop it. I must send her in a composing draught now, as I did last night."

Mr. Stephen Grey gave Mr. Carlton more grace than most busy medical gentlemen would have given—waiting for him until a quarter past seven. He left then. After his departure, Judith went in home; her face was paining her very much; and Mrs. Pepperfly stopped on guard. Scarcely had Judith gone when Mrs. Crane called to her from the next room.

"Judith. Come here, Judith. I want you."

"Now, mum, you are not to talk," cried Mrs. Pepperfly, hastening in. "Mr. Stephen have been a blowing of me up like anything, for suffering it. He as good as said it was my fault."

Mrs. Crane laughed; laughed out merrily, the nurse's tone was so resentfully serious. "Oh, well, I'll be good," she said. "But I do want to speak to Judith for a minute. Is she not there?"

"No, mum, she's gone in home—and Mr. Stephen had better have blown her up instead of me; for

I'm sure it's to her you talk. Settle yourself just for a wink or two of sleep, there's a dear lady."

About eight o'clock the nurse was called down to supper. It was her usual hour for taking it, and she had been exceedingly wrathful the previous night at its having been delayed ; the wrath perhaps causing the widow to get it ready punctually on this. Almost immediately afterwards Mr. Carlton arrived in a hot heat. He had walked from the Rise, he said to Mrs. Gould, who opened the door to him, and was sorry Mr. Stephen Grey had gone. The truth was, Mr. Carlton need not have missed the appointment, but he had lingered at Captain Chesney's. In Laura's society the time seemed to have wings. Mrs. Gould attended him up-stairs, for he said he would see the patient, and then she went down again.

Mr. Carlton had not been talking with the invalid many minutes when a ring at the bell was heard, and somebody ascended the stairs. The surgeon went into the sitting-room, thinking it might possibly be Mr. Stephen Grey. It was, however, Mrs. Pepperfly.

"It's the draught, please, sir," said she.

"Draught?" he repeated, taking a small bottle from her hand. "What draught? One that Mr. Stephen Grey has sent in?"

"Yes, sir, the sleeping draught. He said she

was excited to-night through talking, and must take one."

Mr. Carlton undid the paper, took out the cork, and smelt it. "How strongly it smells of oil of almonds!" he exclaimed.

"Do it, sir?"

"Do it! why, can't you smell it yourself?" he returned. And once more taking out the cork, which he had replaced, he held the phial towards her.

"Yes, sir; but I have got a cold. And when I does have them colds upon me, my nose ain't worth a rush."

The surgeon was still occupied with the draught, smelling it. Then he tasted it, just putting his finger to the liquid, and that to his tongue.

"Extraordinary!" he remarked, in an undertone. "Why should Grey be giving her this? Here, take possession of it, nurse," he added. "It is to be given the last thing."

He returned to the bed-room as he spoke, and Mrs. Pepperfly placed the phial on the cheffonier, where other medicine bottles were arrayed. Then she put her head inside the bed-chamber. Mr. Carlton was standing talking to the sick lady.

"Do you want anything, please, ma'am?"

"Nothing at present," replied Mrs. Crane.  
"You can go down."

The nurse did as she was bid, and not long afterwards Mr. Carlton said good-night to Mrs. Crane, and passed through the sitting-room to take his departure. As he went out on the landing to descend the stairs, he saw what he thought was a face, leaning against the wall by the bed-room door and staring at him ; a man's face with thick black whiskers ; a strange face, looking stern, white, and cold in the moonlight. Mr. Carlton was of remarkably strong nerve—a bold, fearless man ; but the impression this made upon him was so great, that for once in his life he was startled.

“ Who and what are you ? ” he whispered, his voice insensibly assuming a tone of awe, of shuddering terror : for in good truth that face did not look like any earthly one that Mr. Carlton had ever in his life seen.

There was no reply ; there was neither movement nor sound. Uncertain whether the moonlight was not playing him some fantastic trick, the surgeon strode back to the sitting-room, brought out the solitary candle and threw its rays around.

Not a soul was there ; neither man nor woman, neither ghost nor spirit. And yet Mr. Carlton felt certain that a face *had* been there. An unaccountable feeling, vague superstition mixed with real fear, came over him and shook him as he stood ; and yet I say he was by nature a fearless man, and

perhaps this was the first time in his remembrance that such terror had assailed him. He threw the light around the landing; he threw it down the stairs; there was no upper story; but nothing was to be seen, and all was silent and still. Carrying the light still, he went into the bed-room by the door on the landing and cast its rays there. Mrs. Crane glanced up from the bed in surprise.

"Were you looking for anything?" she asked.

"Nothing particular. Good night."

He went straight on to the sitting-room through the intervening door, glancing around him still into every nook and corner, and put the candle back on the mantelpiece whence he had taken it—for Mrs. Crane rather liked lying in the dark. Then he wiped his hot face and descended the stairs, willing to persuade himself that he had been mistaken.

"I think I must be a fool," he muttered.  
"What has come over me to-night? Is the house haunted?"

Soon, all too soon, ere ten o'clock had struck, the house *was* haunted. Haunted by a presence that had no business there—Death.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE COMPOSING DRAUGHT.

It was Mrs. Gould who ran to open the door for Mr. Carlton on his departure. He spoke with her a minute or two, and then went out, she returning to the kitchen and the society of Mrs. Pepperfly.

It may strike the reader that all these details have been given at some length ; but, as was afterwards found, every little event of that ill-starred night bore its own significance.

Mrs. Gould and the nurse resumed their gossip, and were plunged full tide into it, the former leaning back in her chair at her ease before the supper-table, on which stood a suspicious-looking green bottle, its contents white, of which both ladies, if the truth may be told, had been partaking. The latter rose from her seat and was bending over the fire, stirring something in a saucepan, when there came a loud, sharp rap at the kitchen window. Both started and screamed : the widow clapped her glass and teaspoon down on the table, and Mrs. Pepperfly nearly dropped the candle into the sauce-

pan. Although they knew, had they taken a moment's leisure to reflect, that the knock came from Judith, who frequently took that mode of making her visit known on coming in from the other house, it considerably startled them.

Judith it was. And she laughed at them as she stepped inside the passage from the yard, and entered the kitchen.

"What a simpleton you be, Judy, to come frightening folks in that fashion!" cried the widow, irascibly. "One would think you were a child. Can't you come into the house quiet and decent?"

"It was as good as a play to see the start you two gave," cried Judith. "My face is bad, and I am going to bed," she added, changing her tone, "but I thought I'd step in first and see if I could do anything more for Mrs. Crane. I suppose she's not asleep?"

"She's not asleep yet, for Mr. Carlton's but just gone. You can go up and ask her."

It was nurse Pepperfly who spoke: the widow was resentful yet. Mrs. Pepperfly regarded Judith with complaisance, for she took a great deal of care and trouble off her hands, which must otherwise have fallen to the nurse's exclusive share.

Judith proceeded up-stairs. She felt very tired, for she had been up all Friday and Saturday nights, and though she had gone to bed on Sunday night,

she had slept but little, owing to the pain in her face. She was subject to this pain, feeling it whenever she took the slightest cold.

"Is that you, Judith?" cried Mrs. Crane.  
"How is your face-ache now?"

"The pain's getting easier, ma'am," was Judith's answer. "Mr. Stephen Grey said it would, now the swelling had come on. I stepped in to ask whether I can do anything more for you to-night?"

"No, thank you, there's nothing more to be done. I suppose the nurse won't be long before she brings up the gruel. You can tell her I am ready for it as you go down. You will be glad to get to bed, Judith."

"Well, ma'am, I shall, and that's the truth. To lie tossing about with pain, as I did last night, tires one more than sitting up."

"And the two previous nights you were sitting up. I don't forget it, Judith, if you do."

"Oh, ma'am, that's nothing. It's a mercy that you have not required more sitting up than that. Many do require it."

"I!" returned Mrs. Crane in a hearty tone. "I don't believe I required it at all. I am as well as I possibly can be. Mr. Carlton has just said so. I should like to get up to-morrow, Judith."

Judith shook her head, and said something about the danger of being "too venturesome."



"You'll get about all the surer, ma'am, for being quiet for another day or two."

At that moment, in came Mrs. Pepperfly; a flaring candle in one hand, and a tray with a basin of gruel on it in the other. Judith, generally suspicious of Mrs. Pepperfly, went close and glanced attentively into the basin, lest that lady should have seasoned it with a few drops of tallow in the ascent. The light shone full on Judith's swollen face, swollen on both sides, and Mrs. Crane burst into a fit of laughter.

"I can't help it," she said, as they turned to her in amazement. "It is your face that I am laughing at, Judith. It looks like the moon at the full; the cheeks are so round."

"Oh, ma'am, I don't mind the look, so that I am easy. The swelling will soon go down again."

Judith wished her good night and departed. Nurse Pepperfly arranged the basin of gruel conveniently on the bed, and stood by while it was eaten.

"And now for my composing draught," said Mrs. Crane.

"I can't give you that yet, mum," dissented the nurse. "The idea of your taking it right atop of the gruel!"

"I don't suppose it would hurt. It came, didn't it?"

"It came while Mr. Carlton was here, mum. It was that what I brought up, and Mr. Carlton he tasted of it. Just like them doctors! they are sure to put their tongues to each other's medicines."

"Mr. Carlton's going to meet Mr. Stephen Grey here at ten to-morrow," she observed. "And then I shall be under his charge exclusively."

"I heered some'at on it, mum," was Mrs. Pepperfly's answer.

She turned to busy herself about the room, making the night arrangements with Mrs. Gould, who came up to assist her. By the aid of blankets, a bed had been extemporised for herself on the sofa in the sitting-room, and there she slept, the door between the two rooms being left open that the patient might be still under her supervision. Mrs. Pepperfly had really been on her good behaviour hitherto; afraid, perhaps, to run counter to the strict mandate of Mr. Stephen Grey, given to her on entering.

About half-past nine or a quarter to ten, when Mrs. Crane had been made comfortable for the night, the nurse pronounced it time for the composing draught.

"Just light me to get it, will you?" she asked of Mrs. Gould, who happened to have the candle in her hand. And they went into the sitting-room.

The bottle was on the cheffonier where the nurse herself had placed it. She took it to the side of the bed.

"Ready, mum?"

"Quite," said Mrs. Crane.

She, the nurse, poured the contents into a large wine-glass, and Mrs. Crane drank them down, but not before she had made some remark about cherry pie.

"How it do smell!" cried Mrs. Gould, in a whisper, as she stood by with the candle.

"Mr. Carlton said it did," was the nurse's answering whisper. "Them doctors' noses be quick."

"It don't want much quickness to smell this," sniffed the landlady.

"It was just at the moment as I'd took my drop short, and you know——"

An awful cry; bringing the nurse's confession to a stand-still; an awful cry of alarm and agony. But whether it came from Mrs. Crane on the bed, or Mrs. Gould by her side, or from both, Nurse Pepperfly was too much startled to know.

Oh, then was commotion in the chamber! What was amiss with their patient? Was it a fainting fit?—was it a convulsion?—or was it death? Was it the decree of God that was taking her from the world? or had some fatal drug been given to her in error?

There is no mistaking death by those accustomed to the sight; and Mrs. Pepperfly, more thoroughly sobered in brain than she often was, wrung her hands wildly.

"It's death!" she exclaimed to the landlady. "As sure as you and me's standing upright here, it's death, and she is gone! That physic must have been poisoned; and perhaps they'll try us both for giving it to her, and hang us after it."

With a hullabaloo that might have been heard over the way, Mrs. Gould tore down the stairs. She was nearly out of her senses just then, scared out of them with consternation and terror. Partly at the event just happened, partly at the nurse's remark as to possible consequences to themselves, was she terrified. She burst out at the front door, left it open, and ran panting up the street, some confused notion in her mind of fetching Mr. Grey. Before she gained his house, however, she encountered Mr. Carlton.

Without a word of explanation, for she was too breathless and bewildered to give it, she seized his arm, turned to run back again, and to pull him with her. Mr. Carlton did not relish so summary a mode of proceeding.

"Stop!" he exclaimed, "stop! What means this? What's the matter?"

"She's dead!" shrieked Mrs. Gould. "She is lying dead and stark upon her bed."

"Who is dead?" repeated Mr. Carlton.

"Our lodger. The lady you came to see this evening—Mrs. Crane. The blessed breath have just gone out of her."

Almost with the first word of explanation Mr. Carlton shook her arm away and darted off towards the house, she following in his wake. He disappeared within it; and just at the moment the Reverend William Lycett passed, the curate of St. Mark's church. Mrs. Gould seized upon his arm as she had previously seized on Mr. Carlton's, sobbed forth some confused words, and took him up the stairs.

The nurse was standing at the foot of the bed, her eyes round with alarm; and Mr. Carlton had thrown down the bed-clothes and placed his ear close to the heart that lay there. He felt the damp forehead, he touched one of the hands.

"This is awful!" he exclaimed, turning round his pale face. "I left her well little more than an hour ago."

"Is she dead?" asked Mr. Lycett.

"She is dead," replied the surgeon. "What had you been giving her?" he demanded of Mrs. Pepperfly, his tone becoming stern and sharp.

It was the first indication of the consequences to

them, and Mrs. Pepperfly replied meekly, her apron held to her lips.

"Sir, I give her her gruel, and after that I give her her draught. It's of no good denying of it."

"That draught!" repeated Mr. Carlton to himself in a low tone of reproach. Not so low, however, but Mr. Lycett caught the words. "I was wrong not to take it away with me."

"Has she died from poison?" whispered Mr. Lycett.

"From poison—as I believe. What else can she have died from?"

Mr. Carlton, as he spoke, had his head bent over the mouth of the dead, inhaling the breath; or, rather, the odour where the breath had once been.

"You are not acquainted with the properties of drugs as may be gathered from their smell, I presume, Mr. Lycett, or else——"

"Pardon me," was the interruption, "I am quite well acquainted with them. My father is a surgeon, and half my boyhood was spent in his surgery."

"Then just put your nose here and tell me what you find."

The clergyman did as desired; but he drew back his face instantly.

"Prussic acid," he said in a whisper; and Mr. Carlton gave a grave nod of assent. He turned to Mrs. Pepperfly.

"What do you say she had been taking? Gruel? and the draught? The gruel first, of course?"

"In course, sir. She took that soon after you left. There's the basin, by token, never took down again."

Mr. Carlton laid hold of the basin pointed out to him. A little gruel remained in it still, which he smelt and tasted.

"There's nothing wrong here," he observed.

"And her draught, sir, we gave her some time after, three-quarters of an hour, maybe. Not a minute had she took it when—I shan't overget the fright for a year to come—she was gone."

"A year!" echoed Mrs. Gould from the door, where she had stood trembling and sobbing, her head just pushed into the chamber. "I shan't overget it for my whole life."

"Where is the bottle?" inquired Mr. Carlton.

"The bottle!" repeated the nurse. "Where now did I put it? Oh, it's behind you, sir. There, on the little table by the bed's head."

The bottle which had contained the draught lay there, the cork in. Mr. Carlton took out the cork, smelt it, recorked it, and laid it on the table, an angry scowl on his face.

"Do you smell anything wrong?" asked Mr. Lycett.

For answer the surgeon handed him the phial,

and Mr. Lycett removed the cork for one moment, and put it in again. It was quite sufficient.

"Where did the draught come from?" inquired the curate. But the next moment his eyes fell on the label, and he saw it had come from the surgery of the Messrs. Grey.

Mr. Carlton replaced the phial from whence he had taken it, and looked at the landlady. "Mrs. Gould, I think you had better go up and ask Mr. Stephen Grey to step here."

Glad to be away from the death chamber, yet afraid to stay by herself alone, the woman was not sorry to be sent upon the errand. The streets under the bright moon were as light as day, and she discerned Mr. John Grey standing at his own door long before she reached him. The sight seemed to give an impetus to her speed and her excitement, and she broke into sobs again as she made a dash at him.

"Oh, sir! this will kill some of us."

Mr. Grey, a man of strong mind, decisive in speech,—sometimes, if put out, a little stern in manner,—looked calmly at the widow. Like Judith Ford, he had no patience with nervous nonsense. He was a tall man, with aquiline features and keen dark eyes.

"What will kill some of us, Mrs. Gould? Our nerves?"



"Where's Mr. Stephen, sir? Oh, sir, she's dead! And it is that draught which Mr. Stephen sent down to-night that has killed her."

"Who is dead?" returned Mr. Grey in wonderment. "What draught? What are you talking of?"

"The lady Mr. Stephen is attending at my house, sir. He sent her a sleeping-draught to-night, and there must have been poison in it, for she died the minute she had swallowed it. I mean the young lady, Mrs. Crane, sir," she added, perceiving that Mr. Grey appeared not to understand her.

"Dead!" he uttered.

"Stone dead, sir. Mr. Carlton said I had better come up for Mr. Stephen Grey. He's there with Mr. Lycett."

Mr. Grey closed his own door and entered his brother's house. Frederick Grey was coming across the hall.

"Is your father in, Frederick?"

"No. I don't suppose he'll be long. I don't know where he's gone, though. Uncle John, we had a letter from mamma this evening."

"Did he make up a draught to-night for Mrs. Crane, do you know?" continued Mr. Grey, passing unnoticed his nephew's gratuitous information.

"Yes, I know he did, for I was in the surgery at

the time. A composing-draught. Why? It was sent."

"Why, it have just killed her, Master Frederick," put in Mrs. Gould. "It were prussic acid, they say, and no composing draught at all."

"What thundering nonsense!" echoed the boy, who appeared to have caught only the latter words.

"Nonsense, is it, sir?" sobbed the widow. "She's dead."

Frederick Grey glanced quickly at his uncle, as if for confirmation or the contrary.

"I am going down there, Frederick. Mrs. Gould says she *is* dead. As soon as your father comes in, ask him to follow me."

The lad stood looking after them as they went down the street, his brain busy. At that moment he saw their assistant, Mr. Whittaker, approaching from the opposite side of the street. Frederick Grey took his cap from the hall where it was hanging, and went out to meet him.

"Mr. Whittaker, they are saying the new patient, Mrs. Crane, is dead. Do you believe it?"

"Rubbish," retorted Mr. Whittaker. "Mr. Stephen told me to-night she was as good as well. Who says it?"

"Mother Gould. She has been up here to fetch Uncle John, and he has left word that papa is to follow soon. Tell him, will you?"

He vaulted off ere he had well finished speaking, caught up Mrs. Gould at her own door, and ran upstairs after his uncle. Mr. Grey had already entered the chamber of Mrs. Crane. He first satisfied himself that she was really dead, and then began to search out the particulars. Mr. Carlton directed his attention to the bottle.

"Mr. Grey," he said, "you know how chary we medical fraternity are of bringing an accusation or casting blame on one another; but I do fear some most unfortunate error has been committed. The phial has undoubtedly contained prussic acid in some state, and it appears only too certain that it is prussic acid she has died from."

"The phial has certainly had prussic acid in it," returned Mr. Grey; "but it is impossible that it can have been sent by my brother."

"He may not have made it up himself," returned Mr. Carlton. "Is the writing his? 'Composing draught to be taken the last thing. Mrs. Crane.'"

"That is his, and I believe he made up the draught himself. But as to his having put prussic acid in it, I feel sure he did not."

"I was here when it came, and I detected the smell at once," said Mr. Carlton. "At the first moment I thought it was oil of almonds; the next I felt sure it was prussic acid. Not that I sus-

pected for an instant there was sufficient to destroy life, the slightest modicum of a drop, perhaps; though why Mr. Stephen Grey should have put it in I did not understand. Now I cannot tell you why it was, but I could not get that smell out of my head. I think it may have been from reading that case of fatal error in the 'Lancet' last week. You know what I mean?"

Mr. Grey nodded.

"And before I left I told Mrs. Crane not to take the draught unless she heard from Mr. Stephen Grey again. As I went home I called at your house; but Mr. Stephen was not at home. I intended just to mention the smell to him. Had he said it was all right, there was an end of apprehension; but mistakes have been so frequent of late as to put medical men on their guard."

"True," assented Mr. Grey.

"I have but a word to finish," continued Mr. Carlton. "When I found I could not see Mr. Stephen Grey, I went home, made up a composing draught, and was coming out with it when an urgent message came for me to see a patient. It lay in my way here, and I was as quick as could be, but—as you see—not sufficiently so."

Mr. Carlton slightly pointed to the bed as he concluded. Frederick Grey, who had stood by, listening eagerly, suddenly stepped up to him.

"Have you that draught with you, sir?"

"Of course I have," replied Mr. Carlton. But he did not seem pleased with the lad's tones, so unaccountably abrupt and haughty. "Here it is," he added, taking it from his pocket. "You will find no prussic acid in that."

Frederick Grey received the small bottle in his hand, uncorked it, smelt it, and tasted it, just as Mr. Carlton had done by the fatal one. Doctors, as Mrs. Pepperfly remarked, like to put their tongues to physic; and Frederick had possibly caught the habit, for he was already being initiated into the mysteries of the profession, under his uncle and father.

"No, there's no prussic acid in that," said he. "Neither was there in the draught made up by my father. I stood by him the whole of the time and watched him mix it."

They were interrupted by Mr. Stephen Grey. To describe his grief and consternation when he saw the dead, would be impossible. Mr. Whittaker had given him the message, had told him Mrs. Gould had been to them with a tale that the lady was dead; but Mr. Stephen, who knew of old Mrs. Gould and her fears, had set it down in his own mind that the lady had only fainted. Mr. Stephen heard the details with astonishment. They were unaccountable; but he warmly repudiated the sus-

picion as to the error having been made by himself.

"The thing appears to be perfectly unexplainable," exclaimed Mr. Lycett.

Stephen Grey laid his hand lightly on the brow of the corpse. "I declare," said he, in an earnest, solemn tone, "in the presence of what remains of this poor young lady; nay, I declare it in a more solemn presence—that of God, who now hears me—that there was no prussic acid, or any other poison whatever, in the sleeping draught I sent here this night. Some foul play has been at work; or else some most grievous and unaccountable mischance has been unwittingly committed. Mr. Carlton, we must do our best in striving to fathom this. You will aid me in it?"

Mr. Carlton did not hear the words. He had fallen into a reverie. Perhaps *he* was trying to account for the events of that night. His thoughts at that moment were not so much given to the unhappy dead, as to the face he had seen, or thought he had seen, upon the staircase landing earlier in the evening. That the face was none of his own fancy's conjuring up; that it was not an appearance from the world of spirits, but one belonging to a living, breathing person, he felt in his judgment convinced. Did he connect that face with the dark deed which had followed? Did he suspect that

that stealthy visitor, whoever it might be, was the serpent standing and waiting to deal the deadly blow? It cannot at present be told; but it is certain that Mr. Carlton did attach a dread fear, not the less strong for its being vague and undefined, to that shadowy face.

Vague indeed! More than once he caught himself fancying—nay, almost wishing—that it was but a supernatural appearance from the other world.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE COBWEBBED JAR.

WHAT was now to be done? How were they to set about fathoming—as Mr. Stephen Grey suggested—this dreadful business? It was so shrouded in mystery! The poor form, calm and still now, lay upon the bed, and the wondering gentlemen stood around it. Medical men come in contact with strange phases of human life, as exhibited in man's passage from the cradle to the grave, but this little knot of the brethren could only acknowledge to themselves, that of all strange occurrences which had ever passed under their notice, this one appeared to to be about the strangest.

Mr. Carlton suddenly left his place from the far side of the bed, held the door open, and motioned the two women from the room. He then in like manner motioned young Frederick Grey. But the boy, who was standing against the wall, close to it, did not stir in answer.

"I'd rather stay in, Mr. Carlton," he fearlessly said. "Is there any reason why I may not?"



Mr. Carlton hesitated. The words of the boy, spoken out so boldly, had caused the three gentlemen near the bed to look round. Mr. Carlton evidently did wish him to be outside the room, but he as evidently did not see his way quite clear to get him there.

"Is he discreet?" he asked, looking to the two brothers for an answer.

"Perfectly so," replied Mr. John Grey, who did not himself see any reason why his nephew should be expelled.

Mr. Carlton closed the door and returned to the group. "Mr. Stephen Grey has suggested a doubt of foul play," he began; "but is it possible that there can be any feasible grounds for it? I ask, gentlemen, because you are all better acquainted with these two women than I am. If either, or both of them——"

"Goodness, man!" interrupted Mr. Stephen Grey, in his impulsive fashion, "you can't suppose I suspect Mother Pepperfly or the old widow! Pepperfly has her besetting sin, drink; and the widow is a foolish, timorous body; but they'd no more commit murder than you or I would commit it. What could you be thinking of, Mr. Carlton?"

"Pardon me," rejoined Mr. Carlton; "I merely drew the conclusion from your own remark. I'm

sure I have no cause to cast a doubt on them, but there has been no one else about the lady."

"If I understood Mr. Stephen Grey aright, he did not intend to cast suspicion upon any one," interposed Mr. Lycett. "His remark arose simply from the want of being able to account for the mystery."

"Precisely so," assented Stephen Grey. "If my thoughts had a bent one way more than another, it was whether the medicine could have been exchanged or tampered with between my house and this."

"It is not likely," said Mr. Grey. "Dick carries out his medicines in a covered basket. But another idea has suggested itself to me. Stephen, you have seen more of this unfortunate young lady than any one present; I never set eyes on her until now, and I daresay you, Lycett, can say the same. Mr. Carlton has seen her once only——"

"Twice," interrupted Mr. Carlton. "Last night and this. I should not have come down to-night had I known the hour fixed for my meeting Mr. Stephen Grey here had so long passed. But I was with patients on the Rise, and the time slipped by unheeded."

"At any rate you have not seen much of her," rejoined Mr. John Grey. "My brother Stephen has, comparatively speaking; and what I was about

to ask him was this: whether it is at all probable that she herself added the poison to the draught. Was she in low spirits, Stephen?"

"Not in the least," returned Stephen Grey. "She has been as gay and cheerful as a person can be. Besides, she could not have added anything to the draught without being seen by the nurse; and we have her testimony that it was in her possession in the other room until the moment when she administered it."

"Another thing," observed Mr. Carlton; "if the poison was added to the draught after it came here, how could it have smelt of it on its arrival?"

"There lies the greatest enigma of all—why the draught should smell of poison when it got here," cried Stephen Grey.

"Nay," dissented his brother; "there's no wonder at its smelling of poison if the poison was in it; the mystery is, how and where it got into it. In my opinion, setting aside her tragical end, there is a great deal of mystery in the affair altogether. Who was she? Where did she come from? Why did she come here, a stranger to the place and to everybody in it? And what a young thing she appears to be!"

She did indeed look young. A fair, pale, sweet face, lying there with its golden-brown hair falling around it. In the alarm of the first moment Mrs.

Pepperfly had snatched off the cap, and the hair fell down. Her mouth was open, and the pretty pearly teeth were visible. They sighed as they looked upon her.

"May her soul have found its rest!" murmured the clergyman, bending over her for a moment ere they took their departure.

Mr. Carlton lingered behind the rest. He visited her box with his own hands, the nurse lighting him, but it contained no clue whatever as to who she was. Nothing but clothes were in it; not a card, not a scrap of paper, not a letter; nothing was there to solve the riddle.

"Was this one trunk all she brought?" he asked.

"All, sir," replied Mrs. Pepperfly. "There's her work-box a standing on the drawers there, by the bed's head."

The surgeon turned to the work-box, and examined it searchingly and thoroughly, as he had the trunk. Its contents consisted of cotton, needles, and such like accessories to work. There was a piece of embroidery in a midway stage; there was a baby's little cambric night-cap just begun; and there were a few paper patterns. Nothing whatever that could throw any light upon herself or her previous history. Her pocket—a loose pocket which Mrs. Pepperfly drew from under the pillow, where the invalid had kept it—contained a purse alone. Nothing else:

and in the purse there was not much money. Her keys lay on the drawers.

Mr. Carlton locked both the work-box and the trunk, and sealed them with his own seal. "I don't know much about the routine of these affairs," he observed, "but it is right, I suppose, to make all safe until the police come—they can break my seals if they will."

Barely had he spoken when a policeman appeared upon the scene. The news had travelled to the station, and the sergeant himself had come down. He was a big man, with round red cheeks. He listened in silence to the details, which were given him partly by Mr. Carlton, partly by the nurse, and took possession of the basin that had contained the gruel, and the bottle.

Next he laid hold of the candle and began to peer about the two rooms, for what purpose, or how it could at all help the inquiry, he alone knew. He carried the candle out in the landing and examined that, gazing up at the walls, raising his face to the window, through which the moonlight shone so brightly in.

"Is that a door?" he suddenly asked.

Without waiting for a reply he strode to the opposite end of the landing to the window, and pulled a door open. The walls had been grained to imitate grey marble, and this door was grained

also. It looked like part of the wall, and it opened with a key only. It was that key which had attracted the keen sight of the sergeant.

"It's only a closet for brooms and the slop-pail, sir," spoke up Mrs. Gould, who was shivering timidly on the top stairs, holding on by the balustrade.

Even so. It was a very innocent closet, containing only a pail and a couple of brooms. The officer satisfied himself on that point, and closed the door again; but Mr. Carlton, who had not previously known any closet was there, immediately saw that it might have afforded a temporary hiding place for the owner of that face he had seen so close to it earlier in the evening—if indeed that face had not been a myth of his own imagination.

Mr. Carlton could do nothing more, and he took his departure, the face all too present to him as he walked through the moonlit streets. It may be asked why he did not speak of it to the police—why he had not spoken of it to the gentlemen who had been gathered with him round the death-bed. But of what was he to speak? That he thought he saw a strange-looking face, a face half ghostly, half human; a face which had jet black whiskers on its cheeks; that he had thought he saw this on the staircase in the moonbeams, and that when he brought out the candle and threw its rays around

nothing was to be seen? It could not, if it belonged to a human, walking being, have had time to get down the stairs unseen; that was impossible; and he had satisfied himself that it had not taken refuge in the bed-room. It is true there was this closet, which he had not known of, but he did not believe it could have gone in there and closed the door again before he was out with the light. Had he spoken of this, nine persons out of ten would have answered him—it was nothing but your own imagination.

And he was not sure that it was not his imagination. When he had descended the stairs after seeing it, he put the question in a careless sort of way to the landlady, as she came from the kitchen and Mrs. Pepperfly's society to open the door for him—was any strange man on the staircase or in the house?—and Mrs. Gould had answered, with some inward indignation, that there was no man at all in the house, or likely to be in it. Beyond that, Mr. Carlton had not spoken of the circumstance.

He went straight on to his home through the moonlit streets, and soon afterwards retired to rest, or rather to bed, for rest he did not get. That shadowy face haunted him in the strangest manner; he could get no sleep for it, but lay tossing and turning until morning light; and then, when he did get to sleep, he saw it in his dreams.

But we must go back to an earlier hour of the evening, and to the Messrs. Grey. On leaving Mrs. Gould's house they parted with Mr. Lycett at the door, for their road lay in the opposite direction to his, and Mr. John Grey passed his arm through his brother's as they went up the street, young Frederick walking by their side.

"This is a most unfortunate event," began Mr. John.

"It is to the full as mysterious as it is unfortunate," was the reply of his brother. "Prussic acid get into my composing draught! The thing is an impossibility."

"I wonder whether prussic acid had been mixed with the draught, or whether the draught had been poured out and prussic acid substituted?" cried Frederick.

"Don't talk in that senseless way, Frederick," rebuked Mr. Stephen. "Who would pour medicine out of a bottle and substitute prussic acid?"

"Well, papa, it is pretty sure that she took prussic acid: so it must have been given to her in some way."

"From the drain left in the phial, it is apparent that some drops were mixed with the draught, just sufficient to destroy life, and no more," observed Mr. John. "Stephen," he added, lowering his voice, and speaking with hesitation, "are you sure—pardon



the question—but are you sure you did not, in some unaccountable fit of absence, mix it with it yourself ? ”

In good truth the affair, to Mr. John Grey, a man of sound practical sense, did appear most unaccountable. He had turned it over in his mind in all its bearings as he stood by the bed at Mrs. Gould's, and the only possible solution he could come to was, that the poison must have been inadvertently mixed with the draught when it was made up. And yet this appeared most unlikely, for he knew how correct his brother was.

“ I have not mixed medicines for twenty years, John, to make a fatal mistake at last,” was the reply of Stephen Grey. “ No ; the draught was carefully and properly mixed.”

“ I stood by and watched papa do it, Uncle John, and I am sure it was carefully mixed,” said Frederick, rather resenting his uncle's doubt. “ Do you think he could have taken down the jar of prussic acid from its corner in a fit of absence ?—why, he couldn't reach it, you know, without the steps ; and they have not been brought into the surgery to-day. Mr. Fisher saw him mix it too.”

“ Mr. Fisher did ? ”

“ Fisher's seeing me happened in this way,” interposed Mr. Stephen. “ Upon leaving Mrs. Crane, soon after seven this evening, I saw Fisher at his door,

and he made me go in. It was Mrs. Fisher's birthday, and he had a bottle of champagne on the table, about to tap it. I helped them drink it, and then Fisher came out with me for a stroll, first of all turning into the surgery with me, and waiting while I mixed the draught for Mrs. Crane."

"And was the bottle given immediately to Dick?"

"Not immediately," spoke Frederick: "it waited a short while on the counter while Dick finished his supper. But it never was lost sight of for one moment while it was there, as Mr. Whittaker can testify," he added, as if in anticipation of what might be his uncle's next question. "Whittaker came in before papa had quite finished the mixture—that is, he was putting the paper round the bottle—and we neither of us, I or Whittaker, quitted the room until Dick had gone out with it."

"Well, it appears most incomprehensible," exclaimed Mr. John Grey.

The first thing they did on entering was to question Dick. He slept at the top of Mr. John's house, and they proceeded to his room, rousing Mr. Dick from his slumbers: a shock headed gentleman of fourteen, who struggled up in bed, his eyes wild with surprise.

"Wake up, Dick," said his master.

"I am awake, sir," responded Dick. "Be I wanted? is there any physic to take out?"

"No, nothing of that," returned Mr. John. "I only want to ask you a question. Did you carry any medicine to Mrs. Gould's to-night?"

"I took some there, sir. A small bottle."

"Who gave it to you?"

"It were Master Frederick as gave it to me, sir. I took it down and give it to that there fat Pepperfly, for it were she that come to the door."

"Did you go straight there? or did you loiter on your way and put your basket down?"

"I went straight there," replied the boy earnestly. "I never loitered once nor let go of the basket. Do that Pepperfly say as I didn't take it, sir?—or that I took it broke?" he added, believing this unusual cross-questioning must bode some accusation against himself. "She's a big story-teller if she do."

"She has not said anything about you," returned his master; "I only want to know whether that little bottle of medicine was delivered at Mrs. Gould's untouched, in the same state that it was given to you."

"Yes, that it was, sir," was the boy's ready answer, and they could tell by his manner that he was speaking the truth.

Telling him he might go to sleep again, they went down to the surgery. No one was in it then, and the gas was turned very low. Mr. Stephen

turned it on, and brought in the steps from the recess outside, where they were kept. In a remote corner of the highest shelf was a glass jar, labelled "Hydrocyanic Acid;" he mounted the steps and reached it down.

"See!" he exclaimed, "actually cobwebs upon it, woven from the stopper to the jar, and the dust on it an inch thick! that proves it has not been touched for some time. Why, it must be six weeks at least since we had occasion to use it."

It was the only preparation of prussic acid in their possession, of any sort, whether diluted or otherwise, and the seeing the jar in this state completely did away with the half doubt on John Grey's mind touching his brother—he saw that he could not have used it. They leaned their elbows on the counter where the medicines were usually compounded, and talked together over the affair, unable to offer any conjecture or surmise which might tend to solve it.

Thus absorbed, they did not notice the movements of Frederick. He, ever restless, ever seeking to be in action, as boys of that age are sure to be, laid hold of the white linen duster kept in the surgery, and dusted well the glass containing the poison. John Grey caught sight of the feat just as it was accomplished.

"O, Frederick! what have you done?"

"Only taken off the dust and cobwebs, uncle," answered the lad, wondering at the tone of alarm.

"Do you know," cried John Grey, speaking sharply in his excitement, "that that meddling action of yours may cost your father his life? Or, at least, his reputation."

The crimson of emotion rushed violently into the face of Frederick. He made no answer.

"So long as that dust was on the jar, it was a sure proof that it had not been opened. Did you see the cobwebs spun from the stopper to the jar? What could have afforded more certain evidence that the stopper had not been taken out? Those friendly cobwebs might have saved your father."

Frederick Grey felt as if a ball had come into his throat and was choking him: as if it would take his whole life to atone for the imprudence of which he had been guilty.

"It is not likely they will suspect my father," he exclaimed; "and as to accusing him—no, uncle, they will not do that."

"Whom will they accuse, think you? you or me? The medicine went out of this house, and was delivered untampered with to Nurse Pepperfly, was administered untampered with also to the patient, so far as we can learn or suspect. Mr. Carlton,

a man in honourable practice, as we are, testifies that the draught did smell of prussic acid when the nurse put it into his hand; he spoke of it at once, as the nurse proves. To whom, then, will people's suspicions be directed but to him who made up the medicine? You have faith in your father and I have faith in my brother that he could not be, and was not, guilty of the careless error of putting poison in the sleeping draught; but that cobwebbed, dusty jar would have been proof that he had not, for those who have not faith in him. And now you have destroyed it! Go home to bed, boy! you have done enough mischief for one night."

The words, in all their full sting, told on Frederick Grey. A remorse, amounting to positive agony, was taking possession of him for the imprudence he had committed. He did not reply; he was too completely subdued; he only longed to be away from all eyes, where he might indulge his sorrow and his repentance—where he might consider the means, if there were any, of repairing his fault, and pray to God to turn away the evil. He wished his uncle good night in a humble voice, and turned to his father.

"Good night, and God bless you, my darling boy!" said Mr. Stephen, warmly. "You did not do wrong intentionally. Be at ease; I am con-

scious of my own innocence, and I can put my hearty faith in God to make it plain."

Frederick Grey went home and threw himself on his bed, sobbing as if his heart would break, in spite of his sixteen years. There was nobody to whom he could turn for comfort. He was an only child, and his mother, whom he loved better than anything on earth, was away in a foreign land, gone to it in search of health.

Mr. John Grey and his brother remained in the surgery, and were joined by their assistant, Mr. Whittaker, who was a qualified surgeon. They talked the matter over with him, but no solution of it whatever could be arrived at.

"That the draught was given to the boy as Mr. Stephen left it, I and Frederick can both testify," said the assistant. "Dick, it appears, delivered it intact to Mrs. Pepperfly, who took it straight to Mr. Carlton, and he at once smelt the prussic acid. I can't make it out at all. I have heard of magic, but this beats it hollow. What a pity but Mr. Carlton had brought the draught back here when he called."

"Did you see him, Whittaker?" asked Stephen Grey.

"I saw him. There was only myself here. He came in and asked if he could speak a word to Mr. Stephen Grey. Mr. Stephen, I told him, was out, and he went away."

“Well,” said Mr. Grey, “it does appear to be utterly incomprehensible ; time, I suppose, will bring its elucidation upon it. As it does upon most things.”



## CHAPTER IX.

### POPULAR OPINION IN SOUTH WENNOCK.

TUESDAY morning arose, the morning subsequent to Mrs. Crane's death, and South Wennock was in excitement from one end of it to the other. Everybody was out of doors discussing the fatal event. Groups gathered everywhere ; on the pavement, in the high road, on the sills of shops, at private doors, they congregated ; one only theme in their minds and on their tongues. The previous day, Monday, had been pretty fruitful for the gossip-mongers, inasmuch as they had found nuts from the accident to Mr. Carlton and his groom ; but that paltry news was as nothing compared to this. You are aware how prone we are to pick up any little bit of mystery, how we dive into it and strive to make it ours, never resting until it is fathomed ; you may then judge what a dish this must have been for South Wennock's inhabitants, enshrouded on all sides, as it was, with mystery.

Mr. John Grey was right when he assumed that it was on his brother the onus of the affair would

fall. The opinion almost universally taken up was, that Mr. Stephen Grey had committed the error in carelessness, when making up the sleeping draught. The fact that he had been a correct mixer of medicines all his life, went for nothing now.

"I've druv my horses for fifteen year and never throwed 'em down to kill my passengers yet; but that's no reason why I mayn't have the ill-luck some day," spoke the coachman of a four-horse stage, plying daily between two certain towns, and halting at South Wennock for breakfast, at the Red Lion inn. "And that's just it, as I reckon, with Mr. Stephen Grey. He have been a accurate mixer of physic, up to now; but he may have made the mistake at last. The best of us is liable to 'em; as I'm sure the gentlemen standing round knows."

The gentlemen standing round nodded. They formed part of a large group collected at the coach entrance of the Red Lion. The group comprised people of various degrees and grades—gentlemen, tradesmen, and labourers. In a small country place where the inhabitants are all known to each other, they are apt to converse together familiarly on local topics, without reference to social standing.

"Like me," struck in the blacksmith. "I druv a nail right into a horse's foot last week, and lamed him; and I'll be upon my word such an awk'ard

accident hasn't happened to me—no, not for years."

"Look at poor Toker, too!" said a little man, hovering respectfully on the outside of the crowd,—Wilkes the barber. "How many a hundred times had he gone up the river in that punt of his, and always came home safe till last Friday was a fortnight, and then he got drowned at last!"

"I am sorry for Stephen Grey, though," observed a gentleman. "If it has been caused by any mistake of his he will feel it all his life. A tender-hearted man is Stephen Grey."

"It appears to me altogether most unaccountable," remarked the Reverend Mr. Jones, who was the incumbent of St. Mark's Church, and who had come out to join in the popular gossip and excitement. Perhaps because he was a connection of the Greys, his wife and Mrs. John Grey being sisters. "I hear that there was every proof that the jar containing the prussic acid—and they have but that one, it appears, in their surgery—had not been touched."

"Mr. John Grey told me so himself this morning," interrupted another eager voice. "As a proof that their jar had not been touched, it was covered in cobwebs, he said, and remained so covered after the lady was dead; only young Master Fred officiously wiped them off."

There ensued a silence. The crowd generally were deliberating upon this last item of news. It was the first time it had reached them. A substantial grocer of the name of Plumstead spoke. He was not particularly affected towards the Greys, for they dealt at a rival shop; and his voice had a sarcastic tone.

"It had been better, then, that they had let the cobwebs remain, so that the coroner and jury might have seen them."

"John Grey is a man of honour. He would not tell a lie."

One or two shook their heads dubiously. "We don't know what we might do, any of us, toward the saving of a brother."

"Look here!" broke out a fresh voice. "How *could* the poison have got into the draught, except when it was being made up? And how could Mr. Carlton have smelt it, if it had not been in it?"

"Of course it was in it. She would not have died if it hadn't been in it."

"There's the argument. The draught was sent direct from the Greys' surgery to Palace Street, and there's Mr. Carlton and Nurse Pepperfly to testify that it smelt as strong as it could of prussic acid. Why, Mr. Carlton, it turns out, had a sort of suspicion that it might do some harm, and called in at the Greys' to ask about it, only Mr. Stephen was

out and he couldn't see him. I heard say that he blames himself now for not having brought the draught away with him."

"Then why didn't he bring it away?"

"Well of course he never thought that it was as bad as it turned out to be. And there's a report going about that he desired the sick lady not to take the draught."

"Who says that?"

"I heard it."

"At any rate it seems to come to this," observed a gentleman who had not yet spoken. "That when the draught went out of the Messrs. Greys' surgery it went out with the poison in it. And as Mr. Stephen Grey himself mixed that draught, I don't see how he can shift the dilemma from his own shoulders."

"He can't shift it, sir," said a malcontent. "It's all very well to say young Master Fred wiped the cobwebs off the jar. Perhaps he did; but not, I'll lay, before they had been previously disturbed."

"Talking about young Fred," interposed the grocer, "he was going by my shop just now, and I asked him about it. 'My father mixed the draught correctly,' he said; 'I can be upon my word that he did, for I saw him do it.' 'Can you be upon your oath, Master Frederick?' returned I, just by way of catching the young gentleman. 'Yes, I

can, if necessary,' said he, throwing his head back in his haughty, fearless way, and looking me full in the face; 'but my word is the same as my oath, Mr. Plumstead.' And he went off as corked as could be."

"Young Fred is a chip of the old Grey block, open and honourable," cried the little barber. "He may have noticed nothing wrong, and if the boy says he didn't, why I don't believe he did."

"They says," cried another, dropping his voice, "that Mr. Stephen had got his head full of champagne, and couldn't see one bottle from another. That he and Fisher the land-agent had been drinking it together."

"Nonsense!" rebuked the clergyman. "Mr. Stephen Grey is not one to drink too much."

"Why, sir," cried the coachman, willing to bear his testimony—for the aspersion just mentioned had not found favour with him, or with many of those around him—"I heard that Mr. Fisher could be a witness in Mr. Stephen's favour, for he stood by and saw him make up the physic."

At this juncture Mrs. Fitch's head appeared at the side door. She was looking for the coachman.

"Now, Sam Heath! Do you know that your half hour has been up this five minutes?"

Sam Heath, the coachman, hastened up the yard,

as fast as his size would permit him. The fresh horses were already attached to the coach, the passengers were waiting to mount.

Sam Heath had been gathering in the news of the great event that morning instead of attending to his breakfast, and had become absorbed in it.

Before the little diversion caused by this interference of Mrs. Fitch was over, another comer had been added to the collected knot of gossipers. It was the gentleman just spoken of, Mr. Fisher, the land surveyor and agent, a pleasant-looking man of thirty, careless in manner as in countenance. Considering what had just been avowed, as to his knowledge of the affair, there was no wonder that he was rapturously received.

"Here's Fisher! How d'ye do, Fisher? I say, Fisher, is it true that your champagne was too potent for Stephen Grey last night, causing him to mistake prussic acid for wholesome syrup of squills?"

"That's right! Go on, all of you!" returned Fisher, satirically. "Stephen Grey knows better than to drink champagne that's too potent for him, whether mine or anybody else's. I'll just tell you the rights of the case. It was my wife's birthday, and——"

"We heard wedding day," interrupted a voice.

"Did you? then you heard wrong. It was her

birthday, and I was just going to open a bottle of champagne, when Stephen Grey went by, and I got him in to drink her health. My wife had two glasses out of it, and I think he had two, and I had the rest. Stephen Grey was as sober, to all intents and purposes, when he went out of my house as he was when he came into it. I went with him and saw him compound this identical, fatal medicine."

"You can bear witness that he put no prussic acid into it, then?"

"Not I," returned Mr. Fisher. "If it was said to be composed of prussic acid pure, I could not tell to the contrary. I saw him pour two or three liquids together, but whether they were poison, or whether they were not, I could not tell. How should I know his bottles apart? And if I had known them I took no notice, for I was laughing and joking all the time. This morning, when I was in there, Mr. Whittaker showed me the place of the prussic acid, and I can be upon my oath that no bottle, so high as that, was taken down by Mr. Stephen. So far I can say."

"Well, of all strange, incomprehensible events, this seems the strangest. If the draught——"

"Take care! we shall be run over."

The talkers had to scatter right and left. Sam Heath, in all the pride and glory of his box seat,



was driving quickly out of the yard to make up for time wasted, his four handsome horses before him, his coach, filled with passengers inside and out, behind him. It was the break-up of the assemblage, and they dispersed to fall into smaller knots, or to join other groups.

The probabilities appeared too overwhelming against Stephen Grey. A sort of tide set in against him. Not against the man personally, but against any possibilities that the draught could have been fatally impregnated by other hands than his. In vain a very few attempted to take his part; to express their belief that, however the poison might have got into the draught, it was not put there by Stephen Grey; in vain his son Frederick reiterated his declaration, that he had watched the draught mixed, and that it was mixed carefully and correctly; their speaking was as a hopeless task, for the public mind was made up.

"Let it rest, Frederick," said Mr. Stephen to his son. "The facts will come to light sometime, I know, and then they'll be convinced."

"Yes—but meanwhile?" thought Frederick, with a swelling heart. Ay! what in the meanwhile might happen to his father? Would he be committed for manslaughter?—tried, convicted, punished?

## CHAPTER X.

### JUDITH'S PERPLEXITY.

UPON none did Mrs. Crane's death produce a more startling shock than upon Judith Ford. The hours kept at old Mrs. Jenkinson's were early, and the house had gone to rest when it happened, so that even the servant Margaret did not know of it until the following morning. She did not disturb Judith to tell her. Mrs. Jenkinson the previous night had kindly told Judith to lie in bed as long as she liked in the morning, and try to get her face-ache well. Judith, who had really need of rest, slept long, and it was past nine o'clock when she came down to the kitchen. Margaret was just finishing her own breakfast.

"How's your face, Judith?" she asked, busying herself to get some fresh tea for her sister. "It looks better. The swelling has gone down."

"It is a great deal better," replied Judith. "Margaret, I did not think to lie so late as this; you should have called me. Thank you, don't

trouble. I don't feel as if I could eat now; perhaps I'll take a bit of bread and butter later."

Margaret got the tea ready in silence. She was wondering how she could best break the news to her sister; she was sure, break it as gently as she would, that it would be a terrible shock. As she was pouring out the cup of tea her mistress's bell rang, and she had to answer it; and felt almost glad of the respite.

"I wonder how Mrs. Crane is this morning?" Judith said when she returned. "Have you heard?"

"I—I'm afraid she's not quite well this morning," replied Margaret. "Do eat something, Judith—you'll want it."

"Not well," returned Judith, unmindful of the exhortation to eat. "Has fever come on?"

"No, it's not fever. They say—they say—that the wrong medicine has been given to her," brought out Margaret, thinking she was accomplishing her task cleverly.

"Wrong medicine!" repeated Judith, looking bewildered.

"It's more than I can understand. But it—they say that the effects will kill her."

Judith gulped down her hot tea, rose, and made for the door. Margaret caught her as she was escaping through it.

"Don't go, Judith. You can't do any good. Stop where you are."

"I must go, Margaret. Those two women in there are not worth a rush, both put together; at least, the widow's not worth it, and the other can't always be trusted. If she is in danger, poor young lady, you will not see me again until she's out of it. Margaret, then! you have no right to detain me."

Margaret contrived to get the door shut, and placed her back against it. "Sit down in that chair, Judith, while I tell you something. It is of *no use* for you to go in. Do you understand?—or must I speak plainer?"

Judith, overpowered by the strong will so painfully and evidently in earnest, sat down in the chair indicated, and waited for an explanation. She could not in the least understand, and stared hard at her sister.

"It is all over, Judith; it was over at ten o'clock last night. She is dead."

The same hard stare on Judith's countenance. She did not speak. Perhaps she could not yet realise the sense of the words.

"Mr. Stephen Grey sent in a sleeping draught, to be given her the last thing," continued Margaret. "He made some extraordinary mistake in it, and sent poison. As soon as she drank it, she died."

Judith's face had been growing of a livid, death-

like whiteness, but there was the same hard, uncomprehending look upon it. It suddenly changed; the hard look for intelligence, the uncertainty for horror. She uttered a low shriek, and hid her eyes with her hands.

"Now this is just what I thought it would be—you do take on so," rebuked Margaret. "It is a shocking thing; it's dreadful for the poor young lady; but still she was a stranger to us."

Judith had begun to shiver. Presently she took her hands from her eyes and looked at her sister.

"Mr. Stephen sent the poison, do you say?"

"*They* say it. It's odd to me if he did. But her death, poor thing, seems proof positive."

"Then he never did send it!" emphatically cried Judith. "Oh, Margaret, this is awful! When did she die?"

"Well I believe it was about a quarter or ten minutes before ten last night. Mr. Carlton, it appears, called there sometime in the evening, and was there when the draught was brought in, and he smelt the poison in the bottle. He went off to the Greys to ask Mr. Stephen whether it was all right, but she had taken it before he could get back again."

The hard, stony look was re-appearing on Judith's face. She seemed not to understand, and kept her eyes fixed on Margaret.

"If Mr. Carlton smelt the poison, why did he not forbid it to be given to her?" she said after a while.

"Well—upon my word I forget. I think, though, Mrs. Gould said he did forbid it. It was from her I got all this; she came in here as soon as I was down this morning. She is in a fine way, she and old Pepperfly too; but, as I tell her, there's no need for them to fear. It doesn't seem to have been any fault of theirs."

Judith rose from her chair where she had quietly sat during the recital. "I must go in and learn more, Margaret," she said in a resolute tone, as if she feared being stopped a second time.

"Ay, you may go now," was Margaret's answer. "I only wanted to break the news to you first."

Mrs. Gould and nurse Pepperfly were doing duty over the kitchen fire, talking themselves red in the face, and imbibing a slight modicum of comfort by way of soothing their shattered nerves. Judith saw them as she came up the yard. She crossed the house passage and pushed open the kitchen door.

Both screamed. Too busy to see or hear her, sitting as they were with their backs to the window, her entrance startled them. That overcome, they became voluble on the subject of the past night; and Judith, leaning against the ironing-board under-

neath the window, listened attentively, and garnered up the particulars in silence.

"It is next door to an impossibility that Mr. Stephen could have mixed poison with the draught," was her first rejoinder. "I, for one, will never believe it."

The room up-stairs was in possession of the police, but Judith was allowed to see it. The poor young face lay white and still, and Judith burst into tears as she gazed at it.

In going down stairs again she just missed meeting Mr. Carlton. He called at the house, and spoke to the policeman. He, the surgeon, had undertaken to assist the police in their researches to discover who the strange lady was, so far as he could, and had already written to various friends in London if perchance they might have cognisance of her. He appeared inclined to be sharp with Mrs. Pepperfly, almost seeming to entertain some doubt of the woman's state of sobriety at the time of the occurrence.

"It is a most extraordinary thing to me, Mrs. Pepperfly, that the lady did not tell you I had forbidden her to take the draught," he said. "I can scarcely think but that she did tell you. And yet you went and gave it to her."

"I can be upon my Bible oath that she never said nothing to me against taking the draught,"

returned Mrs. Pepperfly, scarcely knowing whether to be indignant or to shed tears at the reproach. "Quite the contrary. She wanted to take it, poor soul, right atop of her gruel; and would have took it so, if I had let her."

Mr. Carlton threw his light grey eyes straight into the woman's face.

"Are you sure you remember all the occurrences quite clearly, Mrs. Pepperfly?"

Mrs. Pepperfly understood the insinuation, and fired at it. "I remember 'em just as clear as you do, sir. And I'm thankful to goodness that as far as that night goes I've not got nothing on my conscience. If it was to come over again to-night, me being still in ignorance of what was to turn out, I should just give her the draught, supposing it my duty, as I give it her then."

"Well, it appears to me very strange that she should have taken it," concluded Mr. Carlton.

In the course of the morning, Judith, in going up the street, encountered Frederick Grey.

"Well, Judith," began the boy in a tone of resentment, "what do you think of this?"

"I don't know what to dare to think of it, sir," was Judith's answer. "Nothing in all my life has ever come over me like it."

"Judith, *you* know papa. Now, do you believe it within the range of possibility—possibility, mind



you—that he should put prussic acid, through a careless mistake, into a sleeping draught?” he continued, in excitement.

“Master Frederick, I do not believe that he put it in.”

“But now, look here. I was present when that medicine was mixed up. I saw everything my father put into it, watched every motion, and I declare that it was mixed correctly. I happened to be there, leaning with my arms on the counter in a sort of idle fit. When papa came in with Mr. Fisher, he told me to go home to my Latin, but I was in no hurry to obey, and lingered on. I am glad now I did! Well, that draught I can declare was properly and safely compounded; and yet, when it gets to Mrs. Crane’s, there’s said to be poison in it, and she drinks it and dies! Who is to explain it or account for it?”

Judith did not reply. The hard look, telling of some strange perplexity, was overshadowing her face again.

“And the town lays the blame upon papa! They say—oh, I won’t repeat to you all they say. But, Judith, there are a few yet who don’t believe him guilty.”

“I, for one,” she answered.

“Ay, Judith. I——”

The lad paused. Then he suddenly bent forward

and whispered something in her ear. Her pale face turned crimson as she listened, and she put up her hands deprecatingly, essaying to stop him.

"Hush, hush, Master Grey! Be silent, sir."

"Judith, for two pins I'd say it aloud."

"I'd rather you said it aloud than said it to me, sir."

There was a pause. Frederick Grey threw back his head in the manner he was rather given to, when anything annoyed him, and there was a fearless, resolute expression on his face which caused Judith to fear he was going to speak aloud. She hastened to change the subject.

"I suppose there will be an inquest, sir."

"An inquest! I should just think so. If ever there was a case demanding an inquest, it's this one. If the verdict goes against my father, it will be my fault." And he forthwith described to her how he had wiped the cobwebs from the jar. "The worst of it is, speaking of minor considerations," he went on, "that nobody knows where to write to her friends, or whether she has any. My father says you took a letter to the post for her."

"So I did, and the police have just asked me about it," replied Judith; "but I did not notice the address, except that it was London. It was to that Mrs. Smith who came down and took away the baby."

"They are going to try and find that woman. Carlton says she ought to be found if possible, because, through her, we may come at some knowledge of who Mrs. Crane was, and he has given a description of her to the police; he saw her on Sunday night at Great Wennock Station. And now I must make a run for it, Judith, or I shall catch it for loitering."

The boy ran off. Judith gazed after him as one lost in thought, her countenance resuming its look of hardness, its mazed perplexity.

## CHAPTER XI.

### THE CORONER'S INQUEST.

THE rain was pouring down in torrents; nevertheless the street of South Wennock was alive with bustle, especially in the vicinity of the Red Lion inn. It was Thursday, the day appointed for the inquest on the deceased Mrs. Crane.

The county coroner, whose residence was in the county town, was momentarily expected, and presently his gig dashed up, he and his clerk in it. It had been wished to hold the inquest on the Wednesday, but the coroner put it off to suit his own convenience. He was a lawyer; a short, stout man, with black hair and a jovial-looking face; and as he emerged from under the large gig umbrella, he shook hands with some of the bystanders, his acquaintances. The clerk followed with a blue bag.

The coroner popped into the bar, swallowed a glass of hot brandy-and-water, and then proceeded to the board-room to swear the jury. It was a long room, the club-room of the inn: a table covered

with green baize ran down it, at which they seated themselves, and the coroner opened proceedings. Then they departed to Palace Street to view the body.

They went splashing through the rain and the mud, their umbrellas of little use, for the wind, remarkably high, kept turning them inside out. A genteel attendance escorted them : all the gentleman idlers in the place, all the curious tradespeople, the unwashed mob, and the street urchins. By the pertinacity with which these last dodged the jury's heels, it might be thought that they believed the august functionaries to be living curiosities from a travelling wild-beast show.

The necessary inspection over, they splashed back to the Red Lion, and the business began. We may glance at the evidence of two or three of the witnesses, but not at all, for it would only be a repetition of what is already known, and tire the reader. Difficulty the first was : What was the young lady's Christian name ? Nobody could answer ; her linen, it was said, was marked with a large C, the initial letter of the word Crane, but with nothing else. Some suggested that this was more probably the initial of her Christian name—Caroline or Charlotte—but it was impossible to say. Her boxes had been examined officially, the large trunk and the workbox ; but no clue as to who she was, or

what she was, was found ; no scrap of paper indicated her previous abode, or why she came there.

Mrs. Fitch, the landlady of the Red Lion, told what she knew of the stranger's arrival by the omnibus, the previous Friday, and that she had recommended her to the lodgings in Palace Street. Mr. Stephen Grey testified to his being summoned to her on the same night, to the subsequent birth of the infant, and to her safe and healthy condition afterwards, up to seven o'clock on the Monday evening, at which hour he last saw her alive. Mr. John Grey and Mr. Brooklyn from Great Wennock, who had conjointly made the post-mortem examination, gave evidence of the cause of her death—poison, by prussic acid ; and there were other points of evidence, technical or otherwise, not necessary to go into in detail.

There had been a question raised by the coroner as to whether Mr. Stephen Grey should give his evidence ; that gentleman expressed himself anxious and willing to tender it ; and at length the coroner decided to admit it, warning Mr. Stephen that he need not say anything to criminate himself, and that what he did say might possibly be used as evidence against him. Mr. Stephen smiled, and replied that all he had it in his power to say might be used against him if it could be. He spoke to the

making up of the sleeping draught, to the ingredients of which it was composed. Frederick Grey, his son, testified that he had seen it made up, minutely describing what had been put into it, as his father had done, and to the sending the draught by Dick, the boy. Dick, who was the next witness, protested, with a very red and startled face, caused by finding himself before a coroner's court, that he had taken it safely and given it into the hands of Nurse Pepperfly.

"Call Nurse Pepperfly," said the coroner.

Nurse Pepperfly was called for in the adjoining room and escorted in, in rather a shaky state, not induced by the imbibing of strong waters—from such she had that morning kept herself free—but from the general agitation caused by the anticipated proceedings. She had attired herself in her best, of course; a short black stuff gown, the worse for stains and dirt, a scarlet woollen shawl, and a rusty black bonnet with a bow at the top. The wind, as she came along the street, had taken the shawl, the bonnet, and the grey hairs underneath, and played with them after its own boisterous fashion; so that altogether Nurse Pepperfly presented a somewhat bewildered and untidy appearance. She wore pattens and white stockings, the latter a mass of splashes, and very distinctly visible from the shortness of the gown; but the extraordinary ro-

tundity of Mrs. Pepperfly's person seemed almost to preclude the possibility of any gown's being made long enough to hide her legs. She took off her pattens when close to the coroner, and held them in one hand : her umbrella, dripping with rain, being in the other. A remarkable umbrella, apparently more for show than use, since its sticks and wires projected a full foot at the bottom through the gingham, and there was no handle visible at the top. There was a smothered smile at her appearance when she came in, and her evidence caused some diversion, not only in itself, but from the various honorary titles she persisted in according to the coroner and jury.

"Your name's Pepperfly?" began the coroner.

"Which it is, my lord, with Betsy added to it," was the response, given with as deep a curtesy as the witness's incumbrances of person would allow her.

"You mean Elizabeth?" said the coroner, raising his pen from his note-book, and waiting.

"Your worship, I never knowed myself called by anything but Betsy. It may be as 'Lizabeth was written in the register at my baptism, but I can't speak to it. Mother ——"

"That will do," said the coroner, and after a few more questions he came to the chief point. "Did you take in some medicine last Monday



evening for the lady you were nursing—Mrs. Crane ? ”

“ Yes, my lord, I did. It were a composing draught; leastways, that’s what it ought to have been.”

“ What time was that.”

“ It were after dark, sir, and I was at my supper.”

“ Can’t you tell the time ? ”

“ It must have struck eight, I think, your worship, for I had begun to feel dreadful peckish afore I went down, and eight o’clock’s my supper hour. I had just finished it, sir, when the ring came ; it were pickled herrings that we had——”

“ The jury do not want to know what you had for supper ; confine yourself to the necessary points. Who brought the medicine ? ”

“ That boy of the Mr. Greys : Dick. An insolent young rascal, Mr. Mayor, as you ever set eyes on. He whips up the cover of his basket, and out he takes a small bottle wrapped in white paper and gives it me. I should like to tell you, my lord, what he said to me.”

“ If it bears upon the case, you can tell it,” replied the coroner.

“ ‘ Now, Mother Pepperfly,’ said he, ‘ how are you off for Old Tom to-night ? ’ My fingers tingled to get at his ears, my lord mayor and corporation, but he backed out of my reach.”

Mrs. Pepperfly in her indignation had turned round to the jury, expecting their sympathy, and the room burst into a laugh.

"He backed away out of my reach, gentlemen, afeared of getting his deserts, and he stopped in the middle of the road and made a mocking face at me, knowing I'd no chance of getting to him, for they are as lissome as cats, them boys, and I'm rather stout to set up a run."

"I told you to confine yourself to evidence," said the coroner, in a reproving tone. "What did you do with the medicine?"

"I took it up-stairs, gentlefolks, and Mr. Carlton came out of the lady's room, for he had just called in, and asked what it was I had got. I said it was the sleeping draught from Mr. Grey's, and he took it out of my hand, and said how it smelt of oil of almonds."

"Oil of almonds? Are you sure that's what he said?"

"Of course I am sure," retorted Mrs. Pepperfly. "I didn't dream it. He took out the cork and he smelt the stuff, and then he said it. 'What could Mr. Stephen Grey be giving her oil of almonds for?' he said."

"Did you smell it?"

"I can't say I did, your lordship, much; though Mr. Carlton was surprised I couldn't, and put it

towards me; but my nose hadn't got no smell in it just at that particular moment, and so I told him."

"Why had it not?" inquired the coroner.

Mrs. Pepperfly would have liked to evade the question. She fidgeted, first on one leg, then on the other, put down her pattens and took them up again, and gave her umbrella a shake, the effect of which was to administer a shower of rain-drops to all the faces in her vicinity.

"Come," said the coroner, sharply, "you stand there to tell the truth. If the stuff emitted so strong a smell, how was it you could not smell it?"

"I had just swallowed a wee drop of gin, sir," replied Mrs. Pepperfly, in a subdued tone. "When my supper were over, Mrs. Gould says to me, 'Just a drain, mum, to keep the herrings down, it's obligatory for your health;' and knowing I'm weak in the stomach, gentlefolks, which gets upset at nothing, I let myself be over-persuaded, and took a drain; but you couldn't have put it into a thimble."

"I daresay you couldn't," said the coroner, while the room tittered.

Mrs. Pepperfly's slip of the tongue took her aback.

"I meant to say as 'twouldn't have filled a

thimble, gentry, I did indeed, for that was the fact; but no wonder my wits is scared out of me, a-standing up here afore you all. Just as I was a swallowing of the wee drain, the ring came to the door, so that I had, as you may say, the gin actually in my mouth when I took the medicine up-stairs; and that's the reason I hadn't got no smell for anything else."

"Who took possession of the draught? You, or Mr. Carlton, or the sick lady?"

"I did, your honours. I put it by the side of the rest of the bottles on the cheffonier in the sitting-room, and ——"

"Was there any other bottle there that could have been mistaken for this?" interrupted the coroner.

"Not one in all the lot," responded the witness. "They were most of them empty bottles, and bigger than the one the draught was in; and they are there still."

"Had any person an opportunity of touching that bottle in the intermediate time between your placing it there, and your administering it to the patient?"

"There wasn't nobody in the house to touch it," returned the witness. "I was nearly all the time afterwards in the room, and there was nobody else. When I went to get it to give it to the lady, Mrs.

Gould lighted me, and I'm sure it hadn't been touched, for the shelf of that cheffonier's a tilting, narrow sort of place, and I had put the draught bottle right in the corner, slanting again' the back, and there I found it."

"Mr. Carlton was gone then?"

"Mr. Carlton? Oh, he went directly almost after the draught came. He didn't stay long, your reverences."

"Witness, I am going to ask you a question; be particular in answering it. There has been a rumour gaining credit, that Mr. Carlton warned you not to administer that draught; is it correct?"

"I declare, to the goodness gracious, that Mr. Carlton never said nothing of the sort," returned the witness, putting herself into a flurry. "My lord—your worship—gentlemen of the honourable corporation all round" (turning herself about between the coroner and jury), "if it was the last blessed word I had to speak, I'd stand to it that Mr. Carlton never said a word to me about not giving the draught. He snifted at it, as if he'd like to snift out what it was made of, and he put a drop on his finger and tasted it, and he said it smelt of oil of almonds; but, as to saying he told me not to give it, it's a barefaced falsehood, my lord judge. He says he ordered Mrs. Crane not to take it, but I declare on my oath that he never

said anything about it to me. And she didn't, neither."

The coroner had allowed her to spend her wrath. "You administered the draught yourself to Mrs. Crane?"

"Yes, I did, as it were my place to do, and Mrs. Gould stood by, a-lighting of me. I put it out into a wine-glass, sir, and then, my mouth being all right again, I smelt it strong enough, and so did Mrs. Gould."

"The lady did not object to take it?"

"No, poor thing, she never objected to nothing as we give her, and she was quite gay over it. As I held it to her she gave a snift, as Mr. Carlton had done, and she smiled. 'It smells like cherry pie, nurse,' said she, and swallowed it down; and a'most before we could look round, she was gone. Ah, poor young lady! I should like to have the handling of them that put it in."

Mrs. Pepperfly, in her sympathy with the dead, or rage against the destroyer, raised her hands before her and shook them. The rings of the pattens clanked together, and the umbrella was ejecting its refreshing drops, when an officer of the court seized her arms from behind, and poured an anathema into her ear.

"A coroner's court was not a place to wring wet umberellas in, and if she didn't mind, she'd get committed."

"Were you conscious that she was dead?" inquired the coroner.

"Not at first, my lord judge, not right off at the moment. I thought she was fainting, or took ill in some way. 'What have upset her now?' I says to Mrs. Gould, and, with that, I took off her night-cap, and rose her head up. Not for long, though," concluded the witness, shaking her head. "I soon see she was gone."

"You know nothing whatever, then, nor have you any suspicion, how the poison could have got into the draught?"

The coroner put this question at the request of one of the jury.

"I!" returned Mrs. Pepperfly, amazed at its being asked her. "No; I wish I did. I wish I could trace it home to some such a young villain as that Dick who brought the bottle down; I'd secure a good place to go and see him hung, if I had to stand on my legs twelve hours for it—and they swell frightful in standing, do my legs, my lord."

"The boy had not meddled with the medicine in bringing it?" cried the coroner, waving his hand to put down the introduced irreverence, touching the legs.

"Not he, my lord mayor," was the reply of the witness. "I wish he had, that I might have been

down upon him, the monkey! But I be upon my oath, and must speak the truth, which is that the bottle came neat and untouched, the white paper round it, just as the Greys send out their physics."

They had done with Mrs. Pepperfly for the present, and she made a curtsy to the four sides of the room, and sailed out of it.

The next witness called was Lewis Carlton. His gentlemanly appearance, good looks, and the ready manner in which he gave his evidence, presented a contrast to the lady just retired.

"Upon my returning home from a journey last Sunday night," he began, when the coroner desired him to state what he knew, "one of my servants handed me a note, which had been left for me, he said, on the previous Friday. It proved to be from a Mrs. Crane, requesting to see me professionally, and was dated from the house in Palace Street, where she now lies dead. I went there at once, found that she had been confined, and was being attended by Mr. Stephen Grey, who had been called to her in consequence of my absence——"

The coroner interposed with a question:

"Have you that note to produce?"

Now the witness had not that note to produce, and, what was somewhat singular, he did not know for certain what had become of the note. When he



was going to visit Mrs. Crane on the Sunday night, he looked for the note, as may be remembered, and could not see it; therefore he came to the conclusion that he had thrown it into the fire with the other letters.

"I really do not think I saved it," he answered. "It is not my custom to keep notes of that sort, and, though I do not positively recollect doing so, I have no doubt I put it in the fire as soon as read. I have looked for it since, but cannot find it. There was nothing in the note that would have thrown light upon the case; half-a-dozen formal lines, chiefly requesting me to call and see her, comprised it."

"Was it signed with her full name?"

"Her full name?" repeated Mr. Carlton, as if he scarcely understood the question.

"We have no clue to her Christian name. This note may have supplied it. Or perhaps it was written in the third person."

"Oh, of course; I scarcely comprehended you," answered Mr. Carlton. "It was written in the third person. 'Mrs. Crane presents her compliments to Mr. Carlton,' &c. That's how it was worded. I gathered from it that she did not expect to be ill before May."

"In your interview with her that evening did you obtain any information as to who she was?"

"Not the slightest. It was late, and I thought

it unwise to disturb her; what little passed between us related chiefly to her state of health. I regretted my absence, and said I was glad to find she was doing well, under Mr. Stephen Grey. She wished me to attend her, now I had returned, and I understood her to say she had been recommended to me by friends, previous to her coming to South Wennock."

"Do you know by whom?"

"I have no idea whatever, and I am not absolutely certain that she did say it. She appeared drowsy, spoke in a low tone, and I did not precisely catch the words. I intended to ask her about it after she got better and was more equal to conversation. There are none of my own friends or acquaintance who bear the name of Crane—none that I can remember."

"Did you take charge of her from that hour?"

"Certainly not. I should not do so without her being professionally resigned to me by Mr. Stephen Grey. I met Mr. Stephen in High Street the following day, Monday, and I requested him as a favour to retain charge of her until that evening or the following morning. I found so much to do for my patients after my short absence, that I had not time to meet him, before that, at Mrs. Crane's. It was arranged that I should be there at seven in the evening, if I were able; if not, at ten the next morning."

"Did you keep the appointment at seven?"

"No, I could not. I did get down, but it was more than an hour later, and Mr. Stephen had gone. Mrs. Crane appeared to be very well, except that she was a little heated; she was in very good spirits, and I told her I should take formal possession of her the next morning at ten. She seemed to think I might have done so that day, and I explained to her how I had been driven with my patients. I inquired if she was not satisfied with Mr. Stephen Grey, but she expressed herself as being perfectly satisfied with him, and said he had been very kind to her."

"Did you inquire of her then by whom she was recommended to you?"

"I did not. She seemed restless, a little excited; therefore I put no questions to her of any sort, save as regarded her health."

"Did the draught come while you were there?"

"Yes. Whilst I was talking with Mrs. Crane, I heard a ring at the front bell, and some one came up the stairs, and entered the sitting-room. I thought it might be Mr. Stephen Grey, and stepped there to see, but it was the nurse. She had a small bottle of medicine in her hand, which she said was the composing draught, and upon looking at the direction, I saw that it was."

"Did you perceive that it bore any peculiar smell?"

"Yes, the moment I had it in my hands. Before I had well taken out the cork, the strong smell struck me ; I thought it was oil of almonds ; but I soon found it was prussic acid."

"It smelt of prussic acid?"

"Very strongly. The nurse professed not to be able to smell it, which I could scarcely believe. I wondered why Mr. Grey should be administering prussic acid, especially in a composing draught, but it was not for me to question his treatment, and I returned the bottle to the nurse."

"You did not suspect there was sufficient in to kill her?"

Mr. Carlton stared, and then broke into a sort of bitter smile.

"The question is superfluous, sir. Had I suspected that, I would have taken better care than I did that she did not drink it. Minute doses of prussic acid are sometimes necessary to be given, and I could not tell what symptoms had arisen in the patient that day. When I returned to Mrs. Crane's chamber, which I did for a few minutes before leaving, I could not get the smell out of my head. The thought occurred to me, could there have been any mistake in the making up of the draught?—for of course we all know that such errors have occurred, and not unfrequently, especially when inexperienced apprentices have been entrusted to make them up.

An impulse prompted me to desire Mrs. Crane not to take the draught, and I did so. I——”

“Did you acquaint her with your fears that there might be poison in it?”

Again the witness smiled. “Pardon me, Mr. Coroner; you do not know much of sick treatment, or you would not ask the question. Had I said to the patient that I thought her medicine might have been poisoned by mistake, I should possibly have given her a dangerous fright; and all frights are dangerous for women in her condition. I told her I did not quite approve of the draught Mr. Stephen Grey had sent in, and that I would go and speak to him about it; but I charged her *not to take to it*, unless she heard again from me, or from Mr. Grey, that she might do so.”

“How do you account, then, for her having taken it?”

“I cannot account for it: my words were as positive as they could well be, short of alarming her. I can only think that she forgot what I said to her.”

“Did you also warn the woman—Pepperfly?”

“No. I deemed my warning to Mrs. Crane sufficient; and I did not see Mrs. Pepperfly about, when I left the house.”

“Do you not think, Mr. Carlton, it would have

been a safer plan, had you put the suspected draught into your pocket?" inquired one of the jury.

"If we could foresee what is about to happen, we should act differently in many ways, all of us," retorted the witness, who seemed cross that his prudence should be reflected on, and who possibly felt vexed at there being any grounds for its being so. "When a calamity has happened, we say, 'if I had known, I would have done so and so, and prevented it.' You may be sure, sir, that had *I* known there was enough poison in that draught to kill Mrs. Crane, or that she would disregard any injunction, and imbibe it, I *should* have brought it away with me. I have regretted not doing so ever since. But where's the use of regretting? it will not recall her to life."

"Go on, sir," said the coroner.

"I went to the Messrs. Grey's. My intention was to see Mr. Stephen, to tell him of the smell the draught bore, and inquire if it was right. But I could not see Mr. Stephen: the assistant, Mr. Whittaker, said he was out. I considered what to do; and determined to go home, make up a proper composing draught, and bring it down. I was rather longer over this than I thought to be, for I found myself obliged to see a patient in the interim."

"You deemed a composing draught necessary for her yourself, then?"

"Mr. Stephen Grey had deemed so, and we medical men rarely like to call in question another's treatment. But I did think it expedient that she should take a soothing draught, for she appeared to be flushed—rather excited, I should say. I was coming down with the fresh draught in my pocket, when I met the landlady in a wild state of alarm, with the news that Mrs. Crane was dead."

"Were you the first with her after death?"

"I was the first, except the nurse; but I had not been in the room above a minute when the Reverend Mr. Lycett followed me. We found her quite dead."

"And, in your opinion, what was the cause?"

"The taking of prussic acid. There is no doubt about it: there was no mistaking the smell from her mouth."

"Look at this phial, Mr. Carlton," continued the coroner: "does it bear any resemblance to the one which contained the fatal draught?"

"It appears to be like it. The directions and handwriting are similar. Oh, yes," he added; as he took out the cork, "it is the same: the smell is in it still."

"Did you observe where the last witness, Pep-

perfly, put the bottle containing the draught, after you returned it to her? I mean when it was first delivered at the house."

"I cannot tell where she put it. I did not notice."

"You did not touch the bottle again, before you left the house?"

Mr. Carlton turned sharply round, facing the audience at the back of the room.

"Who called me?" he inquired.

There had been a great deal of talking, the last minute or two, amidst this crowd, and Mr. Carlton's name was mentioned in conjunction with others; but nobody would confess to having called him.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Coroner," he said, turning back to resume his evidence, "I certainly thought some one called me; and that, whoever it might be, was guilty, considering the time and place, of disrespect to the law. You were inquiring if I touched the phial again before I left the house, after resigning it to Mrs. Pepperfly: I neither touched it nor knew where it was."

"If the proceedings are interrupted by spectators, I shall order the room to be cleared," said the coroner, directing his eyes and voice to the part whence the noise had proceeded. "Those who want to talk can go outside."

The coroner glanced over his notes; he had



apparently come to an end, or nearly so, of the examination of Mr. Carlton.

"Before you retire, I must ask you one more question," said he, looking up. "Have you any clue to this mystery—any suspicion of how the poison could have got into the draught?"

Mr. Carlton remained silent. Was he debating with himself whether he should tell of the face he had seen on the staircase but an hour before the death—the strange, dread face on which the moon was shining? It is certain that that mysterious face had haunted Mr. Carlton's mind more than was pleasant, both at the time and since. Was he doubting whether to denounce it now, as something which had no business in the house, and which might have been connected with the mystery? or did he shrink from the ridicule that would attach to him, at confessing to superstitious fears?

"You do not answer," said the coroner, amidst the dead silence of the court.

Mr. Carlton drew a long breath. His thoughts took a different bent, unconnected with the face.

"I cannot say that I suspect any one," he said, at length. "Neither can I imagine how the poison could have been introduced to the draught, except in the making up, seeing that it smelt of it when it came to Mrs. Crane's."

Another silence, which the coroner broke.

"Very well ; that is, I believe, all I have to ask you, Mr. Carlton ; and I am sure," he added, "that the jury feel obliged to you for the ready and candid manner in which you have given your evidence."

Mr. Carlton bowed to the coroner, and was retiring ; but the coroner's clerk, who appeared to have certain memoranda before him to which he occasionally referred, whispered something in the ear of the coroner.

"Oh, ay ; true," remarked the latter. "A moment yet, Mr. Carlton. Did you not encounter at Great Wennock, on Sunday evening, the person called Mrs. Smith, who took away this unhappy lady's child ?"

"I saw a person there in the waiting-room of the station, who had a very young infant with her. There is little doubt it was the infant in question."

"You had some conversation with her. Did she give any clue as to who the lady was ?"

"She gave me none. I did not know what had occurred, and supposed the child to be the offspring of some resident at South Wennock. I told her that the child was too young and feeble to travel with safety, and she replied that necessity had no law—or something to that effect. I was talking with her but a minute or two, and chiefly about the omnibus, which she said had bruised her much, in

its reckless jolts over the ruts and stones. That was all."

"Should you know her again?"

"I might; I am not sure. I had no very clear view of her face, for it was dusk."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"No, she did not."

"That's all then, I think, Mr. Carlton."

## CHAPTER XII.

### MR. CARLTON RECALLED.

AFTER Mr. Carlton's dismissal, the coroner and jury spoke for some time together, and the result was that Betsy Pepperfly was called for again.

"Now, Mrs. Pepperfly," the coroner began, "do you mean to repeat to me that the deceased lady made no objection to take that draught?"

"She didn't make none at all, my lord mayor. If she had, why should she have took it? she was missis. Quite the conterairsty of her objecting, it were; for she asked for it as soon as she'd swallowed her gruel; but I told her she must not take one right atop of t'other."

"Mr. Carlton says he gave her a charge not to touch the draught. And you tell me upon your oath that she took it without making any demur?"

"I tell you so, Mr. Mayor, upon my Bible oath, and I'd take twenty oaths to it, if you liked. But if you and the honourable corporation" (turning to the jury) "can't believe me, why don't you please

ask the Widow Gould?—From nine o'clock, or a little before it, the time Mrs. Crane had her gruel, the widow never was out of the room at all, and she can speak to all that passed as correctly as me. Not that you'll get much out of her," added Mrs. Pepperfly, in a parenthesis, "for she's a-shaking and sobbing with fright in the next room, afeard of being called in here. She thinks it's like being tried, you see, gentlefolks, and she says she never was had afore a lord judge and jury in her life, and never stood at a transportation bar."

After this luminous piece of information, Betsy Pepperfly finally retired, and the shaky Mrs. Gould was supported in, attired in the poke bonnet and the plaid shawl she had lent to Judith. To try to convince the widow that she was not about to be arraigned at a criminal bar was a hopeless task; her mind upon the subject of bars in general and courts in particular, presenting a mass of inextricable confusion. She carried some pungent smelling salts, and somebody had thrust into her hand a pint bottle of vinegar, wherewith to bedew her handkerchief and her face; but her shaky hand poured so much aside, that the whole room was impregnated with the odour.

"What's your name, ma'am?" asked the coroner, when the business of swearing her had been got over with difficulty.

"Oh, dear gentlemen, do be merciful to me! I'm nothing but a poor widow!" was the sobbing answer.

"Well, what's your name, if you are a widow?" returned the coroner.

"It's Eliza Gould. Oh, goodness, be good to me!"

"Now, if you don't just calm yourself and show a little common sense, perhaps you'll be made to do it," cried the coroner, who was a hot-tempered man. "What are you afraid of?—that you are going to be eaten?"

"I never did no wrong to nobody, as I can call to mind—and it's a dreadful disgrace to be brought here, and me a lone widow!" hysterically answered Mrs. Gould, while the vinegar was dropping from her eyebrows and nose.

"How old are you, ma'am?" snappishly asked the coroner.

"Old?" shrieked Mrs. Gould. "Is this a court of that sort of inquiry?"

"It's a court where you must answer what questions are required of you. How old are you, ma'am?"

Mrs. Gould moaned, and brought out in a tone scarcely audible, that she believed she might be as much as forty-two.

The coroner looked at her grey hairs and her

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wrinkles, and perhaps he was not disinclined for a minute's sport.

"Forty-two," said he, in a loud voice, to his clerk, "take it down. You have spoken correctly, ma'am, I hope," he added, turning again to the witness. "This is a court of justice, remember, and you are upon your oath; you would not like to be tried for perjury."

Mrs. Gould sobbed, and shrieked, and finally went off into real hysterics. When the bustle was over, the coroner began again.

"We have not quite got over the question of age. How old did you say you were?"

"*Must* I tell it?" sobbed Mrs. Gould.

"Of course you must. And now, ma'am, take notice that I ask you for the last time; I cannot have the moments of the court wasted in this manner. How old are you?"

"I'm only fifty-six," howled Mrs. Gould, amidst a torrent of tears and vinegar and a roar of laughter from the room.

"Draw your pen through forty-two, Mr. Clerk; and now perhaps we can go on to business. What do you know regarding the young lady who took your rooms, Mrs. Gould?"

"I don't know anything of her, except that she had a ring on her finger, and therefore must have been married," replied the witness, whose answers

in general life had a frequent tendency to veer from the question.

"Do you know where she came from, or why she came, or who her relations might be, or whether she had any?"

"She said Mrs. Fitch sent her to me, and she said her husband was travelling, and she said no more," continued the witness between her sighs.

"Did she say where he was travelling, or what he was?"

"No, sir. Oh me, I think I shall faint!"

"Perhaps you'll be so complaisant as to wait till your evidence is over, and then faint," suggested the coroner, blandly. "Did she tell you that she purposed making a long stay?"

"She told me she meant to be ill at my house, and that she did not expect the illness until May. She made me tell her the names of the doctors at South Wennock, which I did, and I spoke up for the Mr. Greys, as was only neighbourly, but she said she would have Mr. Carlton."

"Did she give any particular reason for choosing Mr. Carlton?"

"She said she had a prejudice against the Greys, through something she'd heard; and she said some friends of hers had recommended Mr. Carlton. But, I've had it upon my mind, all along, that it was the cabrioil did it."



"That it was what did it?" exclaimed the coroner, while the jury raised their faces.

"The cabrioily. She got me to describe about the Mr. Greys to her, what they were like; and she got me to describe about Mr. Carlton, what he was like, and I did, sir, meaning no harm. I said that the Mr. Greys were pleasant gentlemen who contented themselves with a gig; and that Mr. Carlton was pleasant too, but grand, and had set up his cabrioily. I think that did it, sir, the cabrioily; I think she couldn't resist choosing Mr. Carlton, after that."

There was a coughing and choking in the room, and the coroner's clerk shook as he took down the evidence. The witness called words after her own fashion of pronunciation, and the stress she laid upon the "oil" in cabrioily was something new, indeed, the word, altogether, was new, in her lips—"cab-ri-oil-y."

"She wrote a note to Mr. Carlton," proceeded the witness, "and I got it taken to his house. And when the messenger came back with the news that he was away, she cried."

"Cried!" echoed the coroner.

"Yes, sir, she said the note she had sent to Mr. Carlton engaged him, and she could not afford to pay two doctors. But we told her that if Mr. Grey attended for Mr. Carlton, she would only have to pay one. And that, or something else, seemed to

reconcile her, for she let Mr. Stephen Grey be fetched, after all ; and when it was over, she said how glad she was to have had him, and what a pleasant man he was. The oddest part of it all is, that she had no money."

"How do you know she had none ? "

"Because, sir, none has been found, and them police gentlemen is keen at searching ; nothing escapes 'em. She had the best part of a sovereign in her purse—nineteen and sixpence, they say, but no more. So, how she looked to pay her expenses, her doctor and her nurse, and me—and Mother Pepperfly a boarding with me at the lady's request, and she don't eat a trifle—she best knew, and I say that it does look odd."

"You regaled Mrs. Pepperfly with gin," spoke up one of the jury, relaxing from the majesty of his office. "Was that to be charged, or was it a spontaneous treat ? "

"Oh, dear, good gentlemen, don't, pray throw it in my teeth," sobbed the widow. "I did happen to have a drop of the vulgar stuff in the house ; which it must have been some I got for the workmen when I moved into it three years ago, and have stopped ever since on the top shelf of my kitchen cupboard, in a cracked bottle. I couldn't touch a drop of gin myself without heaving, gentlemen ; my inside would turn against it."

Perhaps Mrs. Gould's eyes likewise turned against it, for they were cast up with the fervour of her assertion till nothing but the whites were visible.

"Ahem!" interrupted the coroner, "you are on your oath;" and Mrs. Gould's eyes came down with a start at the words, and her mouth with them.

"Leastways unless I feel ill," she interjected.

"This is wasting time, ma'am," said the coroner; "we must hasten on. Can you account for the poison getting into the composing draught sent in by Mr. Grey? Did it get into it after it came into your house?"

The witness was considerably astonished at the question; considerably flustered.

"Why, you don't think I'd go and put it in?" she uttered, subsiding into another fit of sobs.

"I ask you," said the coroner, "as a matter of form, whether there was any one likely to do such a thing; any one of whom you can entertain a suspicion?"

"Of course, gentlemen, if you mean to accuse me and Mrs. Pepperfly of poisoning her by prussic acid, the sooner you do it the better," howled the widow. "We never touched the bottle. As the Greys' boy brought it, so it was given to her. And there was nobody else to touch it—although Mr. Carlton as

good as accused us of having got a whiskered man in the house on the sly!"

The coroner pricked up his ears. "When was that?"

"The night of the death, sir. He was there when the draught came, was Mr. Carlton, and when I heard him coming down the stairs to leave, I ran out of the kitchen to open the door for him. 'Is there a man upstairs?' asked he. 'A man, sir,' I answered. 'No, sir; what sort of a man?' 'I thought I saw one hiding on the landing,' said he, 'a man with whiskers.' 'No, sir,' says I, indignant. 'we don't want no man in this house.' 'It was my fancy, no doubt,' answered he; 'I thought I'd just mention it, lest any blackguard should have got in.' But now, gentlemen," continued the widow, wrathfully, "I just ask you, was there ever such an insinuation put to two respectable females? I can bear out Mother Pepperfly, and Mother Pepperfly can bear out me, that we had no man in the house, and didn't want one; we'd rather be without 'em. And one with whiskers too! Thank you for nothing, Mr. Carlton!"

The words seemed to strike the coroner, and he made a note in the book before him. When Mrs. Gould's indignation had subsided, she was again questioned. Her further evidence need not be given, it was only connected with points already

discussed, and at its conclusion she was permitted to retire to the next room, where she had a prolonged fit of hysterics.

The coroner requested the presence again of Mr. Carlton. But it was found that Mr. Carlton had gone. This caused a delay in the proceedings. An officer was despatched for him in haste, and found him at his own home, engaged with a patient. He hurried him up to the court.

“What am I required for?” asked Mr. Carlton.

“I can't say, sir. The coroner said you were to be produced.”

“I thought you had understood, Mr. Carlton, that it is expedient the witnesses should not depart until the inquiry be over,” began the coroner, when he appeared. “Questions sometimes arise which may render it necessary for them to be examined again.”

“I beg your pardon,” replied Mr. Carlton; “I had no idea I was not at liberty to return home; or that I should be wanted further.”

The coroner placed his arms on the table beside him, and leaned towards Mr. Carlton.

“What is this tale,” asked he, “about your having seen a man secreted on the stairs, or landing, on the night of the mur—,” the coroner coughed, to drown the word which had all but escaped his lips—“on the night of the death?”

A scarlet tinge, born of emotion, flushed the face of Mr. Carlton. Were his superstitious feelings going to be hauled out for the benefit of the crowded court?

"Who says I saw one?" inquired he.

"That is not the question," sharply returned the coroner. "Did you see one?"

"No, I did not."

"The last witness, Eliza Gould, testifies that you did—or thought you did."

"The facts are these," said Mr. Carlton. "As I was leaving the patient, the moonbeams shone on the landing through the staircase window, and for the moment I certainly did think I saw a face—the face of a person leaning against the wall."

"What sort of a face?" interrupted the coroner. "A man's or a woman's?"

"Oh, a man's, decidedly. A pale face, as it appeared to me, with thick black whiskers. I believe *now* it was my fancy: it was just a momentary glimpse, or rather idea, and was over directly. Moonbeams, it is well known, play the eyesight curious tricks and turns. I fetched the candle and examined the landing, but no person was to be seen. Before I had well got down the stairs, a conviction was stealing over me that I had deceived myself, that there had been really nothing there, but I

certainly did ask the woman, Gould, when she came to open the door for me, whether or not any strange man was in the house."

"She said, No?"

"Yes: and was intensely offended at my putting the question."

The coroner mused. Turning to the jury, he spoke in a confidential tone.

"You see, gentlemen, had there been really any one concealed upon the stairs, it would be a most suspicious point; one demanding full investigation. That medicine was in the adjoining room, open to the landing, and unprotected by any guard; for the lady in bed could not be supposed to see what took place in the next apartment, and the two women were down stairs. Nothing more easy than for the cork to be abstracted from the medicine sent by the Messrs. Grey, and a few deadly drops poured into it. Provided, I say, the person so concealed there, had a design to do so."

The jury looked grave, and one of them addressed Mr. Carlton:

"Can't you take your mind back, sir, with any degree of certainty?"

"There is quite a sufficient degree of certainty in my mind," replied Mr. Carlton. "I feel convinced, I feel sure, that the face existed but in my fancy. I had gone out from the light room to the

dark landing,—dark, except for the moonbeams—and——”

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Carlton,” interrupted another juryman, “but the witnesses, Pepperfly and Gould, have deposed that the lady’s chamber was in darkness—that the candle was in the sitting-room adjoining, where she preferred to have it left.”

“Have they? I almost forget. Then in passing through the sitting-room I must have got my eyes in contact with the light, for I know that the landing appeared dark. You are right,” added Mr. Carlton. “I remember now that the candle was in the sitting-room, for it was from thence I fetched it to search the landing.”

“Why did you not mention this, witness, when you were first examined?” asked the coroner.

“Mention what, sir? That I fancied I saw a face in the dark, which turned out to be all moonshine?” retorted the witness. “Verily, I should be only too glad to mention anything that would bear upon the case, but I might have got laughed at for my pains.”

“You attach no importance to it, then?”

“None whatever. I feel certain that it was but a freak of my own fancy.”

“Very well, sir. That will do for the present. Are there any more witnesses to examine?” con-



tinned the coroner, addressing the summoning officer.

There were one or two who gave testimony of no importance, and they appeared to be all. Frederick Grey, who had been an eager listener to the witnesses, then stepped forward and addressed himself to the coroner.

"Will you let me make a statement, sir?"

"If it bears upon the case," replied the coroner.

"Does it do so?"

"Yes it does," warmly replied Frederick, his earnest, honest grey eyes flashing. "There has been a cruel suspicion of carelessness cast upon my father: I wish to state that it was I who destroyed the proofs by which it could have been refuted."

And forthwith he told the story of his heedless wiping of the cobwebbed jar.

"Was any one present when you did this, besides you and your father?" asked the coroner.

"Sir, did you not hear me say so? My uncle John."

"Let Mr. John Grey be called," said the coroner. "Gentlemen," he added to the jury, "I am going somewhat out of my legal way in admitting these statements; but I must confess that it does appear to me most improbable that Mr. Stephen Grey whose high character we all well know, should have

been guilty of this fatal carelessness. It has appeared to me entirely improbable from the first; and I deem it right to hear any evidence that can be brought forward to refute the accusation—especially,” he impressively concluded, “after the statement made by Mr. Carlton, as to the face he saw, or thought he saw, lurking near the chamber where the draught was placed. I acknowledge, in spite of Mr. Carlton’s stated conviction, that I am by no means convinced that face was not real. It may have been the face of some deadly enemy of the ill-fated young lady, one who may have followed her to South Wennock for the purpose of destroying her, and stolen nefariously into the house; and then, his work accomplished, have stolen out again.”

“With all due deference, Mr. Coroner, to your superior judgment,” interposed a jurymen, “the suspicion that the poison may have been introduced into the draught after it was in the Widow Gould’s house, appears to be disposed of by the fact that it smelt strongly of it when it was first brought—as sworn to by Mr. Carlton.”

“True, true,” said the coroner, musingly. “It is involved in much mystery. Stand forward, Mr. Grey. Were you present when your nephew wiped the cobwebs and dust from the jar of hydrocyanic acid?” continued the coroner, after he was sworn.

“I was,” replied Mr. John Grey. “My brother

Stephen reached down the jar, which he had to do by means of steps, from its usual place, and the dust and cobwebs were much collected on it, the cobwebs being woven over the stopper—a certain proof that it had not recently been opened.”

“This was after the death had taken place?”

“It was just after it; when we got home from seeing the body. My brother remarked that it was a proof, or would be a proof—I forget his exact words—that he had not used the hydrocyanic acid; and whilst he and I were closely talking, Frederick, unconscious of course of the mischief he was doing, took a duster and wiped the jar. I was not in time to stop him. I pointed out what he had done, and how it might tell against his father, and he was overwhelmed with contrition; but the mischief was over and could not be remedied.”

“You had no other hydrocyanic acid in your house, except this?”

“None at all; none whatever.”

The coroner turned to the jury.

“If this statement of Mr. John Grey’s be correct—and it bears out his nephew’s—we must acknowledge that Mr. Stephen could not have put prussic acid into the draught when making it up. He could not, in my opinion.”

The jury assented. “Certainly he could not,” they said, “if the testimony were correct.”

“Well, gentlemen, we know John Grey to be an upright man and a good man; *and he is on his oath before his Maker.*”

Scarcely had the coroner spoken when a strange commotion was heard outside—a noise as of a crowd of people in the street, swarming up to the Red Lion. What was it? What could it be? The coroner and jury suspended proceedings for a moment, until the disturbance should subside.

But, instead of subsiding, it only came nearer and nearer; and at length burst into the room—eager people with eager faces—all in a state of excitement, all trying to pour forth the news at once.

Some additional evidence had been found.

The whole room rose, even the coroner and jury, so apt are the most official of us to be led away by excitement. What had come to light? Imaginations are quick, and the jury were allowing theirs a wide range. Some few of them jumped to the conclusion that, at least, Dick, the boy, had confessed to having been waylaid and bribed, to allow of poison being put into the draught; but by far the greater number anticipated that the body and legs belonging to the mysterious face had turned up, and were being marched before the coroner.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE TORN NOTE.

THE whole inquest-room, speaking metaphorically, was on its legs—coroner, jury, spectators—as the rushing tide of eager faces surged into it. What were the tidings they had brought?—what new evidence had come to light? Nothing very great, after all.

It was only a part of a letter. In the pocket of the dress which the unhappy lady had worn on the Friday, the day of her arrival at South Wennock, had just been found a half sheet of note paper, with some lines of writing on it and a great blot. It was a somewhat remarkable fact that this dress, hanging up the whole of the time behind the bedroom door, had been overlooked both by the police and by Mr. Carlton, and was not searched by either. The coroner smoothed the crumpled sheet of writing, read it aloud for the information of the jury, and then passed it round for their inspection. It ran as follows :—

“ 13, *Palace Street, South Wrenock,*

“ *Friday Evening, March 10, 1848.* .

“ My dearest Husband,—You will be surprised to hear of my journey, and that I am safe at South Wrenock. I know you will be angry, but I cannot help it, and we will talk over things when we meet. I have asked the people here about a medical man, and they strongly recommend one of the Messrs. Grey, but I tell them I would prefer Mr. Carlton. What do you say? I must ask him to come and see me this evening, for the railway omnibus shook me dreadfully, and I feel anything but——”

In that abrupt manner ended the writing. There was nothing more, except the great blot referred to. Whether she had been suddenly interrupted, or whether the accident of the blot caused her to begin a fresh letter, could not be told ; and perhaps would now never be known.

But with all the excitement, the noise, and the expectation, it positively threw no light whatever upon the mystery—of the mystery of who she was, of her arrival, or the worse mystery of her death. The coroner sat, after the letter had been passed back to him, mechanically smoothing the creased sheet with his fingers, while he thought.

“ Call Mr. Carlton,” he suddenly said.

Mr. Carlton was found in the yard of the inn,

talking to some of the many outside idlers whom the proceedings had gathered together there. After the rebuff administered to him by the coroner, as to his having gone away before, he was determined not so to offend a second time, but waited within call.

"Wanted again!" he exclaimed, when the officer came to him. "I hope the jury will have enough of me."

"There's something fresh turned up, sir. You might have heard here the noise they made, bringing it up the street."

"Something fresh!" the surgeon eagerly repeated. "What is it? Not about the face?" he added, a strange dread mingling with his whispered tones.

"I don't rightly know what it is, sir. The crowd jammed into the room so that I couldn't hear."

"Mr. Carlton, look at this, will you," said the coroner, handing him the torn note, when he appeared. "Can you tell me if it is in the handwriting of the deceased?"

Mr. Carlton took the sheet, glanced at it, clutched it in his hand and strode to a distant window. There he stood reading it, with his back to the room. He read it twice; he turned it over and looked at the other side; he turned it back and read it again. Then he returned to the table where sat the coroner and jury, who had followed his movements in eager expectation.

"How can I tell, Mr. Coroner, whether it is in her handwriting or not?"

"You received a note from her. Can you not remember what the writing was like?"

Mr. Carlton paused a moment and then slowly shook his head. "I did not take particular notice of the handwriting. If we had the two together we might compare them. By the way," he added, "I may perhaps mention that I searched thoroughly for the note in question when I went home just now, and could not find it. There's no doubt I threw it into the fire at the time."

Perfectly true. As soon as Mr. Carlton had got home from his examination-in-chief, he had set himself to search for the note. His conviction at the time was that he must have burnt it with the loose letters and envelopes lying on the table, those which he had thrown on the fire in a heap; it had been his conviction ever since; nevertheless he did institute a search on going home from the inquest. He emptied some card-racks which stood on the mantelpiece; he opened the drawers of the side-board: he went up-stairs to his bed-room, and searched the pockets of the clothes he had worn that night; he looked in every likely place he could think of. It seemed rather a superfluous task to do it, and it brought forth no results; but Mr. Carlton wished to feel quite sure upon the point.



"Then you cannot speak to this handwriting?" asked the coroner.

"Not with any certainty," was the reply of the witness. "This writing, I fancy, looks not dissimilar to the other, so far as my remembrance of it carries me; but that's a very slight one. All ladies write alike now-a-days."

"Few ladies write so good a hand as this," remarked the coroner, giving the torn sheet a jerk upwards to intimate it. "Are you near-sighted, Mr. Carlton, that you took it to the window?"

Mr. Carlton threw his eyes full in the face of the coroner, incipient defiance in their expression.

"I am not near-sighted. But the rain makes the room dark, and the evening is coming on. I thought, too, it must be a document of importance, throwing some great elucidation upon the case, by the commotion that was made over it."

"Ay," responded one of the jury, "we were all taken in."

There was nothing more to be done; no further evidence to be taken. The coroner charged the jury, and he ordered the room to be cleared while they deliberated. Among the crowds filing out of it in obedience to the mandate, went Judith Ford. Judith had gone to the inquest partly to gratify her own pardonable curiosity—though her intense feeling of interest in the proceedings might be cha-

racterised by a better name than that ; partly to be in readiness in case she should be called to bear testimony, as one of the attendants who had helped to nurse the lady through her illness.

She was not called, however. Her absence from the house at the time of the taking the medicine, and of the death, rendered her of no avail in a judicial point of view, and her name was not so much as mentioned during the day. She had found a seat in a quiet but convenient corner, and remained there undisturbed, watching the proceedings with the most absorbed interest. Never once from the witnesses, and their demeanour, as their separate evidence was given, were her eyes taken. Judith could not overget the dreadful death ; she could not fathom the circumstances attending it.

In groups of fives, of tens, of twenties, the mob, gentry and draggletail, stood about, after their compulsory exit from the inquest-room, conversing eagerly, waiting impatiently. Stephen Grey and his brother, Mr. Brooklyn, Mr. Carlton, and a few more gentlemen collected together, deeply anxious for the verdict, as may be readily imagined ; whether or not it would be manslaughter against Stephen Grey.

Judith meanwhile found her way to Mrs. Fitch. She was sitting in her bar-parlour—at least, when any odd moment gave her an opportunity to sit ;

but Mrs. Fitch could not remember many days of her busy life so full of bustle as this had been. She was, however, knitting when Judith in her deep mourning appeared at the door, and she started from her seat.

"Is it you, Judith? Is it over? What's the verdict?"

"It is not over," said Judith. "We are sent out while they deliberate. I don't think," she added, some pain in her tone, "they can bring it in against Mr. Stephen Grey."

"I don't think they ought, after that evidence about the cobwebs," returned the landlady. "Anyway, though, it's odd how the poison could have got there. And I say, Judith, what tale's this about a face on the stairs?"

"Well, I—don't know, ma'am. Mr. Carlton says now he thinks it was all his fancy."

"It has got a curious sound about it, to my mind. I know this—if the poor young lady was anything to me, I should have it followed up. You don't look well, Judith."

"I can't say but it has altogether been a great shock and puzzle to me," acknowledged Judith, "and thinking and worrying over a thing does not help one's looks. What with my face having been bad—but it's better now—and what with this trouble, I have eaten nothing solid for days."

"I'll give you a drop of cherry brandy——"

"No, ma'am, thank you, I couldn't take it," interposed Judith, more vehemently than the kind-hearted offer seemed to warrant. "I can neither eat nor drink to-day."

"Nonsense, Judith! you are just going the way to lay yourself up. It is a very dreadful thing, there's no doubt of that; but still she was a stranger to us, and there's no cause for its throwing us off our proper meals."

Judith silently passed from the topic: "I am anxious to get a place now," she said; "I shouldn't think of all this so much if I had something to do; besides, I don't like to impose too long on Mrs. Jenkinson's kindness. I suppose you don't happen to have heard of a place, Mrs. Fitch?"

"I heard to-day that there was a servant wanted at that house on the Rise—where the new folks live. Their housemaid's going to leave."

"What new folks?" asked Judith.

"Those fresh people that came from a distance. What's the name?—Chesney, isn't it? The Chesneys. I mean Cedar Lodge. It might suit you. Coming! coming!" shrieked out Mrs. Fitch, in answer to a succession of calls.

"Yes, it might suit me," murmured Judith to herself. "They look nice people. I'll go and see after it."

The words were interrupted by a movement, a hubbub, and Judith hastened outside to ascertain its cause. Could the deliberation of the jury be already over? Yes, it was even so. The door of the inquest-room had been thrown open, and the eager crowd were pressing on to it. A few minutes more, and the decree was spoken; was running like wildfire to every part of the expectant town.

“We find that the deceased, whose married name appears to have been Crane, but to whose Christian name we have no clue, came by her death through swallowing prussic acid mixed in a composing draught; but by whom it was thus mixed in the draught, or whether by mistake or intentionally, we deem there is not sufficient evidence to show.”

So Stephen Grey was yet a free man. His friends pressed up to him, and shook him warmly by the hand. While young Frederick, with a cheek of emotion, now white, now crimson, galloped home through the mud and shut himself in his bed-room, there to hide his thankfulness and his agitation.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### CAPTAIN CHESNEY'S HOME.

WRETCHED as the weather had been with its wind and its rain, the sun showed itself just before its setting, and broke forth with a glowing red gleam, as if it would, in compassion, accord a glimpse of warmth and brightness to the passing day which had been longing for it.

Its slanting beams fell on that pleasant white house on the Rise, the residence of Captain Chesney; they came glimmering through the trees and dancing on the carpet in the drawing-room. The large French window opening to the ground looked bright and clear with these welcome rays, and one of the inmates of the room turned to them with a glad expression; an expression that told of some expectant hope.

Seated at the table was the eldest daughter, Jane Chesney; a peculiarly quiet-looking, lady-like young woman of thirty years, with drooping eyelids, blue eyes and fair hair. She had some bits of paper before her that were wonderfully like bills, and an open

account-book lay beside them. There was a patient, wearied expression in her face, that seemed to say her life was not free from care.

Touching the keys of the piano with a masterly hand, but softly, as if she would subdue its sound, her brilliant brown eyes flashing with a radiant light, and her exquisite features unusually beautiful, sat Laura Chesney. Three-and-twenty years of age, she yet looked younger than she was; of middle height, slight and graceful, with the charm of an unusually youthful manner, Laura never was taken for her real age. She was one of the vainest girls living; though none detected it. Girls are naturally vain; beautiful girls very vain; but it has rarely entered into the heart of woman to conceive of vanity so intense, as that which tarnished the heart of Laura Chesney. It had been the one passion of her life—the great passion which overpowered other implanted seeds, whether for good or for evil, rendering them partially dormant. Not that vanity was her only failing; far from it; she had others less negative: self-will, obstinacy, and a rebellious spirit.

Latterly, another passion had taken possession of her; one which seemed to change her very nature, and to which even her vanity became subservient—love for Mr. Carlton. It is her eyes which are turning to this bright sunshine; it is her heart

which is whispering he will be sure to come! She was dressed in a handsome robe of glittering silk, hanging sleeves of costly lace shading her small white arms, on which were golden bracelets. Jane wore a violet merino, somewhat faded, a white collar, and small white cuffs on the closed sleeves its only ornament. The one looked fit to be the denizen of a palace; the other, with her plain attire and gentle manner, fit only for a quiet home life.

And, standing near the window, softly dancing to the time of Laura's music, and humming, in concert, was the little girl, Lucy. Her frock was of similar material to Jane's, violet merino, but far more faded, the frills of her white drawers just peeping below its short skirt. She was a graceful child of eleven, very pretty, her eyes dark and lustrous as Laura's, but shining with a far sweeter and softer light, and there was a repose in her whole bearing and manner, the counterpart of that which distinguished her eldest sister.

In the room above was the naval half-pay captain, unusually fierce and choleric to-night, as was sure to be the case when getting well from his gouty attacks. Far more noisy and impatient was he at these times than even when the gout was full upon him. The means of the family were grievously straitened, the captain having nothing but his half-



pay—and what is that to live upon? They were encumbered by debt. Life had long been rendered miserable by it. And in truth, how can these poor straitened men, gentlemen of connections as they often are, keep debt from their door? Captain Chesney was, to use a familiar expression, over head and ears in it. He had quitted the neighbourhood of Plymouth, where they had lived for so many years, simply because the place grew too hot to hold him, his creditors too pressing to be borne with. South Wennock was becoming the same, and people were growing troublesome.

It was Jane who bore the brunt of it all. Perhaps no father had ever been loved with a more yearning, ardent, dutiful love than was Captain Chesney by his daughter Jane. To save him one care she would have forfeited her existence; if by walking through a sea of fire—and this is not speaking metaphorically—she could have eased him of a minute's pain, Jane Chesney would have stepped lovingly to the sacrifice. Not upon him, not upon the others, had fallen the daily pains and penalties inseparable from a state of debt, but upon Jane. The petty hourly cares and crosses, the putting-off of creditors, the scheming how to make their ten shillings go as far as other people's twenty, the anxiety for the present, the sickening dread of the future, and what might be the climax—Jane

bore it all meekly, patiently. But it was wearing her out.

She sat now over the last week's bills, leaning her aching head—aching with care more than pain—upon her hand, and adding them up. Jane was not a good accountant; few women are; they are not trained to be so; and she had to go over the columns more than once. It was not the work which wearied and damped her; it was the dread glance at the sums total, and the knowledge that these bills could only be put away with those of many many weeks back, unpaid. She pushed them from her, but with a gentle action—there was gentleness in every movement of Jane Chesney—and leaned back in her chair with a sobbing sigh.

“Lucy, child, I wish you would not dance so. It puts me out.”

The little girl looked half surprised. “I am not making a noise, Jane.”

“But the movement, as you wave about, makes my head worse.”

“Have you the headache, Jane?”

“Yes. At least—my head is so perplexed that it seems to ache.”

Laura turned round, her eyes flashing. “You are worrying your brains over those wretched bills, Jane! I wonder you will get them about! I should

just let things go on as they can, and not torment myself."

"Let things go as they can!" echoed Jane, in a tone of pain. "Oh, Laura!"

"What good can you do by worrying and fretting over them? What good *do* you do?"

"Somebody must worry and fret over them, Laura. If I were not to do it, papa must."

"Well, he is more fit to battle with such troubles than you are. And it is his own imprudence which has brought it all on. But for the extravagance of bygone years, papa would not have reduced himself to his half-pay——"

"Be silent, Laura!" interrupted Jane, her tone one of stern authority. "How dare you presume to cast a reflection on my dear father?"

Laura's face fell, partly in submission to the reproof, partly in angry rebellion. Laura, of them all, most bitterly resented the petty annoyances brought by their straitened life.

"Papa is as dear to me as he is to you, Jane," she presently said, in a tone of apology for her words. "But I am not a stick or a stone, and I can't help feeling the difference there is between ourselves and other young ladies in the same rank of life. Our days are nothing but pinching and perplexity; theirs are all flowers and sunshine."

"There is a skeleton in every closet, Laura; and

no one can judge of another's sorrows," was the quiet answer of Jane. "The lives that look to us all flowers and sunshine—as you term it—may have their inward darkness just as ours have. Recollect the Italian proverb, '*Non v'è rosa senza spina.*'"

"You are going altogether from the point," returned Laura. "What other young lady—in saying a young lady I mean an unmarried one, still sheltered from the world's cares in her father's home—has to encounter the trouble and anxiety that you have?"

"Many a one, I dare say," was the reply of Jane. "For myself, if I do but save the trouble and anxiety to my dear father, I think myself amply repaid."

Too true; it was all that was thought of by Jane; the one great care of her life—the saving annoyance to her father. In the long night watches, when a dread of what these debts might result in for Captain Chesney would press upon her brain, Jane Chesney would lay her hand on her burning brow and wish that England's laws could be altered, and permit a daughter to be arrested in the place of her father. Laura resumed.

"And who, save us, have to live as we live? barred up—it's no better—in a house, like so many hermits; not daring to visit or be visited, lest such

visiting might increase by a few shillings the weekly liabilities? It's a shame!"

"Hush, Laura! If we take to repining, that will be the worst of all. It is our lot, and we must bear it patiently."

Laura Chesney did not appear inclined to bear it very patiently just then. She struck the keys of the instrument loudly and passionately, playing so for a few moments, as if finding a vent for her anger. The little girl had leaned against the window in silence, listening to her sister, and turning her sweet brown eyes from one to the other. Suddenly there came a sound on the floor above as if a heavy walking-stick was being thumped upon it.

"There, Laura! that's because you played out so loudly!" cried the child. "To-day, when I was practising, I forgot myself and took my foot off the soft pedal, and down came papa's stick as if he would have knocked the floor through."

Laura Chesney rose, closed the piano, not quite so gently as she might have done, and went to the window. As she stood there looking out, her soft dark hair acquired quite a golden tinge in the light of the setting sun.

Thump! thump! thump! came the stick again. Jane sprang from her seat. "It is not the piano: papa must want something."

A voice loud and imperative interrupted her

as she was hastening from the room. "Laura! Laura!"

Jane drew back. "It is for you, Laura. Make haste up."

And Laura Chesney, as she hastened to obey, caught up a small black mantle which lay on a chair, and threw it over her white shoulders. It served to conceal her rich silk dress and the golden bracelets that glittered on her wrists.

Lucy Chesney remained a few minutes in thought as her sister left the room. Things were puzzling her.

"Jane, why does Laura put that black mantle on to go up to papa? It must be to hide her dress. But if she thinks that papa would be angry with her for wearing that best dress and mamma's golden bracelets every evening, why does she wear them?"

A somewhat difficult question for Jane Chesney to answer—to answer to a young mind which was being moulded for good or for ill.

"Laura is fond of dress, Lucy. Perhaps she fancies papa is less fond of it."

"Papa is less fond of it," returned the child. "I don't think he would care if we wore these old merinos—oh, until next winter."

Jane sighed. "Dress is expensive, Lucy, and you know——"

"Yes, I know, Jane," said the little girl, filling up the pause, for Jane had stopped. "But, Jane, *why* should Laura put that best dress on at all? She had not used to put it on."

Now, in truth, this was a question which had likewise occurred to Miss Chesney. More than once of late, when Laura had appeared dressed for the evening, Jane wondered why she had so dressed. Not a suspicion of the cause—the unhappy cause which was to bring ere long a great trouble upon them—had yet dawned on the mind of Jane Chesney.

"And I want to ask you something else, Jane. What did you mean by saying there was a skeleton in every closet?"

"Come hither, Lucy." She held out her hand, and the child came forward and placed herself on a stool at Jane's feet. Jane held the hand in hers, and Lucy sat looking upwards into her sister's calm, placid face.

"If mamma had lived, Lucy, perhaps you might not have needed to ask me this, for she would have taught you and trained you more efficiently than I have done ——"

"I'm sure, Jane," interrupted the child, her large eyes filling with tears, "you are as good to me as mamma could have been; and you teach me well."

"As we pass through life, Lucy, darling, troubles come upon us : cares, more or less heavy ——"

"Do they come to us all, Jane ? To everybody in the world ?"

"They come to us all, my dear ; it is the will of God. I do not suppose that anybody is without them. We know what our own cares are ; but sometimes we cannot see what others can have—we cannot see that they have any, and can scarcely believe in it. We see them prosperous, with pleasant and plentiful homes ; nay, with wealth and luxury ; they possess, so far as we can tell, health and strength ; they are, so far as we can see, a happy and united family. Yet it often happens that these very people, who seem to us to be so fortunate as to be objects of envy, do possess some secret care, so great that it may be hastening them to the grave before their time, and all the greater because it has to be concealed from the world. Then we call that care a skeleton in the closet, because it is unsuspected by others, hidden from others' eyes. Do you understand now, Lucy ?"

"Oh, yes. But, Jane, why should care come to everybody ?"

"My child, I have just told you it is the will of God. Sometimes we bring it upon ourselves, through our own conduct ; but I'll not talk to you of that now. You are young and light-hearted, Lucy,



and you cannot yet understand the *need* of care. It comes to wean us from a world that we can stay but a little time in ——”

“Oh, Jane! we live to be old men and women!”

Jane Chesney smiled; care and its bitter fruits—bitter to bear, however sweet they may be in the ending—had come to her early, and made her wise.

“The very best of us live but a short time, Lucy—for you know we must speak of time by comparison. Threescore years and ten here, and ages upon ages, life without ending, hereafter. Well, dear, care and sorrow and disappointment come to draw our love from this world and to teach us to long for the next—to long for it, and to prepare for it. Care is permitted to come to us by God, and *nothing* comes from Him but what is good for us.”

“Why do people hide their care?”

“It is our nature to hide excessive care or joy; they are both too sacred to be exposed to our fellow-mortals; they are hidden away with God. Lucy, dear, you are too young to understand this.”

“I shall look out for the skeleton now, Jane. When I see people who seem a little dull, I shall think, Ah, you have a skeleton in your closet!”

“It exists where no dulness is apparent,” said Miss Chesney. “I remember meeting with a lady—it was before we came to South Wennock—who

appeared to possess every requisite to make life happy, and she was light-hearted and cheerful in manner. One day, when I had grown intimate with her, I remarked to her, that if anyone ever appeared free from care, it was herself. I shall never forget her answer, or the deep sadness that rose to her face as she spoke it. 'Few, living, have been so afflicted with anxiety and care as I have been; it has come to me in all ways; and, but for God's support, I could not have borne it. You must not judge by appearances, Miss Chesney.' The answer took away my illusion, Lucy; and the tears rose involuntarily to my own eyes, in echo to those which earnestness and remembrance had called up to hers."

"What had her sorrow been, Jane?"

"She did not say; but that her words and affliction were only too true, I was certain. She appeared to be rich in the world's ties, having a husband and children, brothers and sisters—having all, in short, *apparently*, to make life happy. The skeleton exists where we least expect it, Lucy."

"Suppose it ever comes to me, Jane. Should I die?"

"No, dear," laughed Jane Chesney, the little girl's quaint earnestness was so droll. "It does not come to run away with people after that fashion it rather comes to teach them how to live. I will

repeat to you a sentence, Lucy, which you must treasure up and remember always, 'Adversity'—adversity is but another name for care and sorrow, no matter what their nature," Jane Chesney broke off to say, "'Adversity hardens the heart, or it opens it to Paradise.' When it shall come to you, the great ugly skeleton of adversity, Lucy, you must let it do the latter."

"That is a nice saying, Jane ; I like it," repeated Lucy. "Adversity hardens the heart, or it opens it to Paradise."

## CHAPTER XV.

### CAPTAIN CHESNEY.

LAURA had hastened up-stairs at her father's summons. Captain Chesney was reclining in an easy-chair, his feet extended out before him on what is called a rest. The feet were swathed in bandages, as gouty feet sometimes must be. He was quite helpless, so far as the legs were concerned; but his tongue and hands were the reverse of helpless,—the hands kept up the noise of the stick perpetually, and the tongue its own noise, to the extreme discomfort of the household. He bent his eyes with displeasure upon Laura from beneath their overhanging brows.

“ Was that you, playing ? ”

“ Yes, papa.”

“ Oh, it was not Lucy ? ”

“ Papa, you know that Lucy could not play like that.”

“ A good thing for her,” roared Captain Chesney, as a twinge took him, “ for I should have ordered her to be whipped first, and sent to bed afterwards.

How dare you annoy me with that noisy squeaking piano? I'll sell it."

As a day never passed but Captain Chesney gave utterance to the same threat, it made but little impression upon Laura.

"Where's Jane?" he went on.

"She's at those everlasting bills, papa," was Laura's reply, who, truth to say, did *not* regard her father with the excessive reverence and affection that Jane did, and was not always in manner so submissively dutiful.

"Ugh!" retorted the captain. "Let her throw them behind the fire."

"*I* should," put in Laura; but the assenting remark greatly offended him, and for five minutes he kept up an incessant scolding of Laura.

"Is that inquest over?" he resumed.

"I don't know anything about it, papa."

"Has Carlton not been up?"

"No," replied Laura, bending to smooth the pillow under her father's feet, lest the sudden accession of colour, which she felt rush to her cheeks, should be noticed. In doing this, she unwittingly touched the worst foot in the worst part; and the unhappy captain, one of the most impatient to bear pain that the gout ever came to, shrieked, shook his stick, and finally let off some of what Miss Laura was in the habit of calling his quarter-deck language.

"Papa, I am very sorry ; my hand slipped," she deprecatingly said.

"Did you ever have the gout, Miss Laura Chesney?"

"No, papa."

"Then perhaps you'll exercise a little care when you are about those who do have it, and not let your hand 'slip.' Slip, indeed ! it's all you are good for, to agonise suffering people. What do you do here ? Why don't you let Jane come up ?"

"Why, papa, you called me up."

"That cantankering piano ! I'll send for a man to-morrow, and he shall value it, and take it away. What's the reason that Carlton doesn't come ? He's getting above his business, is that fellow. He has not been here all day long. I have a great mind to turn him off and call in one of the Greys. I wish I had done so when we first came here ; *they* are attentive. You shall write him a note, and tell him not to put his foot inside my gate any more."

Laura's heart turned sick. Sick lest her father should execute his threat.

"He could not be dismissed without being paid," she said, in a low tone, hoping the suggestion might have weight ; and the captain growled.

"Has Pompey come back ?" he began again, while Laura stood submissively before him, not daring to leave unless dismissed.

"Not yet, papa. He has scarcely had time to come back yet."

"But I say he has had time," persistently interrupted the captain. "He is stopping loitering over that precious inquest, listening to what's going on there. One fool makes many. I'll loiter him with my stick when he returns. Give me that."

The captain rapped his stick violently on a table in his vicinity, pretty nearly causing the saucer of jelly which stood there to fly off it. Laura handed him the saucer and teaspoon.

"Who made this jelly?" he asked, when he had tasted it.

"I—I dare say it was Jane," she replied, with some hesitation, for Laura kept *herself* entirely aloof from domestic duties. She knew no more than the man in the moon how they went on, or who accomplished them, except that it must lie between Jane and the maid-servant.

"Is it made of calves' feet, or cow-heels, I wonder?" continued the captain, growling and tasting. "If that's not made of cow-heels, I'm a story-teller," he decided, in another minute. "What does Jane mean by it? I told her I would not touch jelly that was made of cow-heel. Wretched stuff!"

"Then, papa, I believe you are wrong, for I think Jane ordered some calves' feet a day or two ago," protested Laura. But she only so spoke to

appease him ; and the irascible old sailor, somewhat mollified, resumed his pursuit of the jelly.

“What did Clarice say?” he asked.

“Clarice?” repeated Laura, opening her eyes in wonder. Not wonder only at the question, but at hearing so much as that name mentioned by her father.

The ex-sailor opened his, and fixed them on his daughter, “I ask you what Clarice said?”

“Said when, papa?”

“When? Why, when Jane heard from her the other morning. Tuesday, wasn’t it?”

“Jane did not hear from Clarice, papa.”

“Jane did, young-lady. Why should she tell me she did, if she didn’t? So you want to keep it from me, do you?”

“Indeed, papa,” persisted Laura, “she did not hear from her. I am quite sure that she did not. Had she heard from her, she would have told me.”

A cruel twinge took the captain’s right foot. “You be shot!” he shrieked. “And serve you right for seeking to deceive your father. A pretty puppet I should be in your hands but for Jane! Here, put this down. And now you may go.”

Laura replaced the saucer on the table, and went back to her sisters, thankful for the release.

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"Papa is so cross to-night," she exclaimed, "is finding fault with everything."

"Illness does make a person irritable, says a man," spoke Jane, soothingly, ever ready to attenuate her father. "And papa, you know, has been accustomed to exact implicit obedience on his own ship, just as if he were captain of a kingdom."

"I think the sailors must have had a fine time at it," said Laura; and Jane forbore to inquire in

right she spoke it; she could not always be con-

vinced. "What was the jelly made of, Jane, and

cow-heel?"

"Cow-heel."

"There! papa found it out, or thought he

though I am sure the nicest palate in the

cannot tell the difference, when it's well flav-

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Jane Chesney sighed deeply. "Calves' feet

very dear!" she said. "I did it for the

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"And any one but you would let him know

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"Jane, have you heard from Clarice lately?" resumed Laura.

Miss Chesney lifted her eyes somewhat in surprise. "Had I heard, Laura, I should not be likely to keep the fact from you. Why do you ask that question?"

"Papa says that you heard from her on Tuesday; that you told him so. I said you had not heard, and he immediately accused me of wanting to hide the news from him."


"Papa says I told him I had heard from Clarice!" repeated Jane Chesney in astonishment.

"He says that you told him you heard on Tuesday."

"Why, what can have caused papa to fancy such a thing? Stay," she added, as a recollection seemed to come to her, "I know how the mistake must have arisen. I mentioned Clarice's name to papa, hoping that he might be induced to break the barrier of silence and speak of her. I said I thought we should soon be hearing from her. That was on Tuesday."

"Why do you think we shall soon be hearing from her?"

"Because—because"—Miss Chesney spoke with marked hesitation—"I had on Monday night so extraordinary a dream. I feel sure we shall hear from her before long."



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"Illness does make a person irritable, especially a man," spoke Jane, soothingly, ever ready to extenuate her father. "And papa, you know, has been accustomed to exact implicit obedience in his own ship, just as if he were captain of a little kingdom."

"I think the sailors must have had a fine time of it," said Laura; and Jane forbore to inquire in what light she spoke it; she could not always be contending. "What was the jelly made of, Jane, calves' feet, or cow-heel?"

"Cow-heel."

"There! papa found it out, or thought he did: though I am sure the nicest palate in the world cannot tell the difference, when it's well flavoured with wine and lemon. He said he wondered at you, Jane, putting him off with cow-heel. I was obliged to tell him it was calves' foot, just to pacify him."

Jane Chesney sighed deeply. "Calves' feet are so very dear!" she said. "I did it for the best. If papa only knew the difficulty I have to go on at all."

"And any one but you would let him know of the difficulty," boldly returned Laura. But Jane only shook her head.

"Jane, have you heard from Clarice lately?" resumed Laura.

Miss Chesney lifted her eyes somewhat in surprise. "Had I heard, Laura, I should not be likely to keep the fact from you. Why do you ask that question?"

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walk which swept round the lawn, and looked over the gate. There stood a respectable-looking man in a velveteen dress. He was the proprietor of a fly in the neighbourhood, which Captain Chesney had extensively patronised, being rather given to driving about the country ; but the captain had not been found so ready to pay. Apart from his straitened means, Captain Chesney possessed a sailor's proverbial carelessness with regard to money : it was not so much that he ran *wilfully* into expense, as that he ran *heedlessly* into it. It never occurred to the captain, when he ordered the fly for an hour or two's recreation, and would seat himself in state in it, his legs up on the seat before him, his stick in his hand, and one of his daughters by his side, that the time of settling must come. Very pleasant and sociable would he be with the driver, for there lived not a pleasanter man, when he pleased, than Captain Chesney ; and the driver would lean down from his box and touch his hat, and tell about this place they were passing, and the other place. But the time of settling had come, was long past ; a good deal of money was owing to the man, and he could not get it.

"Captain Chesney is ill ; he cannot be seen," began Laura, in a haughty, impatient tone. "Can you not take your answer ?"

"I've took too many such answers, miss," replied

the applicant. "Here I come, day after day, week after week, and there's always an excuse ready. 'The captain's out,' or 'the captain's ill.' It is time there was a end to it."

"What do you want?" asked Laura.

"Want! why, my money. Look here, miss. I'm a poor man, with a wife and family to keep, and my wife sick a-bed. If I can't get that money that the captain owes me, it'll be the ruin of me; and have it I must and will."

He spoke in a civil but yet in a determined tone. Laura wished from her very heart that she could pay him.

"Here you have been, miss, the captain and some of you ladies, always a-riding about in my fly, a-hindering me from letting it to other customers that would have paid me; and when I come to ask for my just due, nobody's never at home to me."

"Is it much?" asked Laura.

"It's seven pound twelve shillings. Will you pay me, miss?"

She was startled to hear it was so much. "I wish I could pay you," she involuntarily exclaimed. "I have nothing to pay with."

"Will you let me in then, to see Captain Chesney?"

"When I tell you he is ill, and cannot see you,



I tell you truth," replied Laura. "You must come when he is better."

"Look here, miss," said the man. "You won't pay me; perhaps it's true that you can't; and you won't let me in to see the captain, who could. So I'll be obliged to you to give him a message from me. I'm very sorry to annoy any gentleman, tell him; but I must do it in self-defence; and now this is Thursday, and as true as that we two, miss, stand here, if the money is not paid me between this and twelve o'clock on Saturday, I'll take out a summons against him for the debt."

The man turned away as he spoke, and walked rapidly down the hill. Laura leaned on the gate, giving way to her vexation. She was not so often brought into contact with this sort of unpleasantness as Jane, and perhaps it was well she was not, for Laura would not have borne it placidly. She felt at that moment as if any asylum, any remote desert, would be a haven of rest, in comparison with her father's home.

Suddenly she lifted her head, for one was approaching who had become to her dangerously dear, and she recognised the step. A rich damask flushed her cheek, her eyelids fell over her eyes that they might hide their loving light, and her hand trembled as it was taken by Mr. Carlton.

"My darling! were you watching for me?"

She neither said yes nor no ; the bliss of meeting him, of being in his presence, of feeling her hand in contact with his, was all-sufficient ; rendering her far too confused to answer rationally.

And did Mr. Carlton love her ? Yes, it has been said so—loved her with a powerful and impassioned love. He had been a man of wayward passions, stopping at little which could promote their gratification, and perhaps there were some passages in his bygone life which he did not care to glance back at ; but his heart had never been awakened to *love*—to pure, spiritualised love—until he knew Laura Chesney. For some little time now it had been his ardent desire, his purpose, to make her his wife ; and for Mr. Carlton to *will* a thing was to do it. Laura anticipated strong objection from her father and her family. Mr. Carlton cared no more for such objection than for the idle wind.

“Papa has been so impatient for you, Lewis,” she murmured.

“Is he worse to-night ? ”

“Oh, no. But he is very irritable.”

“I did not intend to come in now,” remarked Mr. Carlton. “I have a call to make a little higher up, at Mrs. Newberry’s, and I thought I would take Captain Chesney on my return. I could remain longer by coming afterwards.”

“I think you had better just come in to papa

first, if only for a few moments," said Laura. "Perhaps," she timidly added, "you can come in again when you have been to Mrs. Newberry's?"

She touched the spring by which the gate was opened, a spring unknown to troublesome customers, and Mr. Carlton entered. He held out his arm to escort her to the house.

"No, no," she whispered, with a deep blush. "Jane is at the window."

"So much the better, my dearest. Yes, Laura, I will have you take it," he said with firmness, placing her hand within his arm. "You tell me you prefer that they should become acquainted with this by degrees, rather than that I should speak at once to Captain Chesney. But, Laura, I promise you one thing,—that I shall speak to him ere much more time has passed over our heads."

Jane, who had merely been wanted for a minute by her father, was in the drawing-room again, and standing at the window with Lucy, when Laura advanced, leaning on the arm of Mr. Carlton. Jane's face expressed its astonished disapprobation, and even the little girl was conscious that—according to the notions of the family—it ought not to have been.

"Jane, do you see Laura?"

"Laura is thoughtless, my dear. She forgets herself."

Mr. Carlton went up-stairs at once to Captain Chesney. He did not stay; and in coming down stepped in at the open door of the drawing-room. Lucy ran from it as he entered, and Laura had evidently but that moment gone in. Miss Chesney returned his salutation coldly.

"You have made but a short visit to papa, Mr. Carlton," she remarked.

"I am coming in again after I have seen a patient higher up," he replied. "What an unfavourable day it has been!"

"Yes it has. Do you know whether the inquest is over?" continued Jane, her reserve merging in her curiosity.

"It is only just over. And that is why my visit to Captain Chesney is so late this evening. They had me before them three or four times."

"What is the verdict, Mr. Carlton?" asked Laura; and the reader may remark that while she had called him by his Christian name, had spoken familiarly, when they were alone, she was formal enough with him now, in the presence of her sister. Deceit! deceit! it never yet brought forth good fruit.

"Nothing satisfactory," was the surgeon's answer. "They found that the cause of death was the prussic acid in the draught; but how it got into it they deemed that there was no evidence to show."

"What should you have called 'satisfactory?' " asked Miss Chesney.

Mr. Carlton smiled. "When I say not satisfactory, I mean that the whole affair still lies in uncertainty."

"Do *you* suspect any one yourself, Mr. Carlton?"

"Not of wilfully causing the death. But," he added, in a more hesitating tone, "I have, of course, my own opinion."

"That it occurred through the careless mistake of Mr. Stephen Grey?"

The surgeon nodded his head. "Through some mistake, undoubtedly; and it is impossible to look to any other quarter for it. But I should not care to express so much in public. It is not agreeable for a medical man to find himself obliged to cast reflection on a brother practitioner."

"I do not see that there can be the slightest shade of doubt upon the point," remarked Miss Chesney. "The medicine was taken straight from Mr. Stephen Grey's hands to the sick room, therefore how else could it have got in? And your having smelt the prussic acid when the draught was brought up, is a sure proof that it must have been done in the mixing. Has anything come out about the poor young lady's connections? who she was, or where she came from?"

"Not anything," replied Mr. Carlton. "They cannot even discover her Christian name."

"And have you not found out who it was who recommended her to you, Mr. Carlton?" inquired Laura.

"I cannot find out at all. I wrote on Tuesday to the various friends in London whom I thought at all likely to have mentioned me, and have had answers from some of them to-day; but they deny all knowledge of Mrs. Crane. You see, there is great uncertainty in every way; for we are not even sure that she did come from London."

Laura resumed. "It is said she was very beautiful. Was she so, Mr. Carlton?"

Mr. Carlton paused ere he gave his answer. "In health, and up and dressed, she may have been so; but I did not see her dressed, you know. I saw her only in bed, and by candlelight."

He spoke the last final words as he crossed the hall to depart, for he was in haste to pay his visit to the house higher on the Rise.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MISS CHESNEY'S FEAR.

LAURA CHESNEY stood at the window, watching the retreating form of the surgeon, Mr. Carlton, as he passed hastily down the garden path in the growing twilight. A short while, and he would be back again as he had promised ; and Laura's heart beat at the thought, at the anticipated rapture of seeing him again, and she remained silent, losing herself in dreams of the sweetest delusion.

Only to be rudely awakened. Miss Chesney stepped to Laura's side and spoke, her gentle voice sounding strange in its sternness.

"Laura, could it be that I saw you walk through the garden when Mr. Carlton came, arm-in-arm with him ?"

Laura turned her face away from her sister's view, or even in that fading hour Miss Chesney would have seen the red flush that overspread it at the words, dyeing it of a blood-red. She made no answer.

"It was not seemly, Laura. Mr. Carlton is but

a surgeon : a man, so far as we know, without connections. And you are a Chesney."

"*With* connections," retorted Laura, who was growing vexed and angry. "And much good they do me!"

"Laura dear, we are, as may be said, of the noblesse: we may not lose caste."

"I think we have lost caste already, with these wretched, paltry debts hanging over and following us about from place to place like a shadow," was the petulant answer. "They degrade us pretty well."

"You mistake, Laura. If you intend that as a refutation to my argument, you look at things in a wrong light. In one sense of the word the debts degrade us, because there always is a degradation attaching itself to these petty debts; but they cannot in the slightest degree sully our caste; they cannot detract from our good birth or tarnish it. Do not again allow Mr. Carlton to put himself on a familiar level with you."

Loving him, as she did, with an impassioned, blind, all-absorbing love, Laura Chesney in her heart bitterly resented this reflection on Mr. Carlton. She was fast falling into that sadly mistaken, unhealthy frame of mind in which every consideration is lost in the one swaying passion—love. Openly she did not dare to dissent from her sister; it might have brought on an explanation for which Laura was not



prepared ; and Jane, deeming she had said enough, passed to a different topic.

“What did the fly driver say?”

“He insisted on the money's being paid to him between now and twelve o'clock on Saturday ; failing it then, he will proceed against papa publicly. Jane, I am sure the man will carry out his threat. He was not loud and angry, not even uncivil ; but he was resolute.”

“And how is it to be procured ?” moaned Jane, leaning her head upon her hand. “I would almost sell myself,” she added, with a burst of feeling, “rather than bring these annoyances before papa ? Oh, if I could but take these troubles more effectually off him !”

“Papa can do battle with them a great deal better than you can, Jane,” said Laura, who was far from sharing Jane's ultra filial feeling on the point. “And it is more fit that he should.”

“It is not more fit,” retorted Jane Chesney, whose usually gentle spirit could be roused by any reproach cast on him. “He is my dear dear father, and I ask no better than to devote my life to warding off care from his.”

“Would you *wish* no better ?” asked Laura, in a low, wondering tone, as she glanced at the bliss presenting itself for *her* future life—the spending it with Lewis Carlton.

"Nor wish better," replied Jane. And the younger sister gazed at her in compassion and half in disbelief.

"There are other petty cares coming upon us, Laura," resumed Jane, in a different tone. "Rhode has given me warning to leave."

"Rhode has!" quickly echoed Laura in surprise. "What for?"

"To 'better herself,' she said. I suspect the true motive is, that she is tired of the place. There is a great deal to do; and she hinted, somewhat insolently, that she did not like a service where applicants were continually coming for money only to be put off; it 'tried her temper.' I told her she might go the instant I could procure a fresh servant. I do not choose to keep dissatisfied people in the house longer than can be helped. She—What is it, Lucy?"

The little girl had come running in, eagerly. "Jane, a young woman wants to see you."

"Another creditor," thought Jane with a sinking heart. "Is it the woman from the fruit shop, Lucy?"

"Oh no. Rhode says it is a young woman come after the place. She has taken her into the kitchen, and wished me to ask if you would please to see her."

Miss Chesney looked as though she scarcely

understood. "A young woman come after the place!" she repeated. "Why it is not an hour since Rhode told me she must leave! Ring the bell, Lucy."

Rhode came in, in answer. Miss Chesney requested an explanation with quiet dignity, and Rhode turned red, and put on a defiant look, as if she could be again insolent if she saw fit.

"I have made up my mind to it some days, Miss Chesney, and I daresay I may have spoken of it abroad. The young woman says Mrs. Fitch at the Lion told her of the place."

"Show the young woman into the dining-room," said Miss Chesney. And she proceeded thither, encountering Pompey on her way, who informed her of the termination of the inquest, and its result.

In the dining-room stood Judith Ford. She had come straight up as soon as the inquest was over. Neatly dressed in good mourning, steady in demeanour, her face full of sense and thought, Jane Chesney took a fancy to her at the first glance. Judith gave a few particulars as to herself, concluding with observing that she had been informed by Mrs. Fitch it was a housemaid who was required, but the servant Rhode had now told her it was a cook.

"In point of fact, it may be said to be both," replied Miss Chesney. "We require a servant who

can undertake both duties—a maid-of-all-work, as it is called. We are gentlepeople and highly connected," she hastened to add, not in a spirit of proud, mistaken boasting, but as if it were due to their own dignity to explain so far; "but my father, Captain Chesney, has a very limited income, which obliges us to keep as few servants as possible. Could you take such a place?"

Judith reflected a moment before giving her reply. In her time she had lived in the capacity of cook and was equal to its duties, but it was not the place she would have preferred.

"Should I be the only servant kept, ma'am?" she inquired, feeling, in the midst of her demur, that she should like much the gentle lady before her for a mistress.

"The only maid servant. We keep a man who attends on papa and waits at table; he helps a good deal also in the kitchen, gets in coal, cleans the knives, and such-like; and he answers the door in a general way. I do not think you would find the work too much."

"I think I might venture upon it," observed Judith, half in soliloquy. "I once lived sole in a place. It was a gentleman's family, ma'am, too. I have never served in any other."

"We could not take a servant from a tradesperson's family," returned Miss Chesney, who was

deeply intrenched in her aristocratic prejudices.

"Where is it that you say you are staying?"

"Number fourteen, Palace Street."

The sound struck on Miss Chesney's ear.

"Number fourteen, Palace Street! Why! that must be close to the house where that sad tragedy has just taken place!"

"It is next door to it, ma'am," was Judith's answer.

All Jane Chesney's curiosity, all her marvel—and the best of us possess a good share of it—was aroused. "Did you see the young lady?" she inquired, quite breathless in her interest.

"I saw her several times; I was with her," was Judith's answer. "Mr. Stephen Grey could not get the nurse for her that he wished, and he was glad that I could be with her; he saw a great deal of me, ma'am, in my last place."

"It was a terrible thing," remarked Miss Chesney.

"It was an awful thing," said Judith, "wherever the blame may lie."

"That of course lies with Mr. Stephen Grey. There cannot be two opinions upon it."

"There *can*, ma'am," dissented Judith, in an impressive but respectful manner. "The jury—to go no further—were of a different opinion."

"I can understand their verdict; that is, understand the feeling which prompted them to return it.

They did not like to bring in one against their fellow townsman. Mr. Stephen has been so much respected in the town—as I hear; but we are little more than strangers in South Wennock.”

“The case is altogether shrouded in unaccountable mystery,” said Judith, her own voice assuming unconsciously a tone of awe as she spoke. “It may come to light some time; I trust it will; whenever it does I am sure it will be found that Mr. Stephen Grey was innocent.”

“Do you think there was no mistake made in the medicine?”

“I feel persuaded there was none; that it was sent out from Mr. Stephen Grey’s pure. That the young lady was murdered,—as deliberately and wickedly murdered as anybody ever was in this world, is my firm belief.”

“By whom?”

“Ah, ma’am, there it all lies. That is the mystery that nobody can fathom.”

“Pompey has been saying that the people were talking when they came out of the inquest room about the strange face on the stairs. They said that, but for that, the verdict might have gone against Mr. Stephen Grey.”

This interposition came from Lucy Chesney; she had come silently into the room to look at the young woman who was seeking to live with them.

The unfortunate affair in Palace Street, with its strange attendant circumstances, had excited all her interest—as such affairs will and do excite the interest of children—and every little additional detail was eagerly picked up by Lucy.

“What strange face was seen on the stairs?” exclaimed Jane Chesney, forgetting reproof in her surprise.

“Pompey says that Mr. Carlton saw a man with a strange face by the lady’s bed-room door, just before her death, Jane.”

Jane Chesney recalled her scattered senses. “Lucy, go up to papa,” she said. “You should not have come in here without asking my permission, and you must not listen to all the idle tales brought home by Pompey.”

The little girl went away in obedience, but half reluctantly, and Miss Chesney inquired an explanation of Judith.

“When Mr. Carlton paid a visit to Mrs. Crane the night of the death, he thought, in leaving, that he saw a strange face on the stairs. Mr. Carlton now says he thinks it was only his fancy; but, ma’am, the coroner seemed to attach a great deal of importance to it. It is a pity,” added Judith, again falling into soliloquy, “but all the circumstances could be brought into the full, clear light of day.”

"*Seemed* to attach—you do not mean to say you were at the inquest!" exclaimed Miss Chesney.

"Yes, I was, ma'am. I have now come from it."

"I never heard of such a thing," cried Miss Chesney, recovering from her astonishment. It did sound very strange to her that a servant should attend a coroner's inquest for—as she supposed—pleasure.

"I was anxious to be there," explained Judith, "and I did not know but I might be called upon also as a witness. Though I had known the young lady but three or four days, ma'am, I had learnt to love her, and since she died I have hardly touched food. I could not have rested without hearing the evidence. And I am very glad I did hear it," she added, pointedly and emphatically. "My having been at the inquest will not make me the less good servant, ma'am."

Miss Chesney could not avoid a smile. Of course it would not, she answered; but the admission had sounded strange. However, she was not one to carry on gossip with a servant, and she quitted the subject for the other, which had brought Judith to the house.

The result of the interview was, that Judith's character was to be inquired into of her late mistress, and she was told to come again in a day or two for a final answer.



Miss Chesney, deep in thought, entered the drawing-room with a quiet step ; and a choking sensation of pain, of dread, rushed over her, for she fancied she saw her sister Laura's face lifted hurriedly from the shoulder of Mr. Carlton. She *must* have been deceived, she repeated to herself the next moment ; yes, she must have been deceived.

But he was certainly standing there ; they were standing together in the slight remaining rays of light that came in at the window. Jane Chesney's eyes suddenly opened to much that had hitherto been obscure—to Laura's fastidiousness latterly on the subject of her own dress, to the beaming look of radiant happiness sometimes to be seen on her face, to her unaccountable restlessness when they were expecting the daily professional visit of the surgeon. Could it be possible that she was learning to love him ?

Crossing the room, she stirred the black fire into a blaze, rang for the lamp, and turned to Laura ; speaking sharply.

"Why are you in the dark, Laura ?"

"Because Pompey did not bring in the lamp, I suppose," returned Laura, in a tone breathing somewhat of incipient defiance.

Jane pressed down her anger, her *fear*, and composed her manner to calmness. "I did not know

you had returned, Mr. Carlton," she said. "Have you been back long?"

"Long enough to talk secrets to Laura," he laughingly replied, in a bold spirit. "And now I will go up to Captain Chesney."

He met the black servant carrying the lamp in as he quitted the room. Pompey was getting to be quite an old man now; he had been in Captain Chesney's service for many years.

"Let the shutters be for the present, Pompey," said his mistress; "Come in again by-and-by. What is all this, Laura?" she added impatiently, as the man left the room.

Laura Chesney remained at the window, looking out into the darkness, her heart full of rebellion. "What is what?" she asked.

"What did Mr. Carlton mean—that he had been talking secrets to you?"

"It was a foolish remark to make."

"And he presumingly spoke of you by your Christian name!"

"Did he?"

"*Did* he! Did you not notice it? Laura, I—I thought—I thought I saw your head leaning upon him," returned Jane, speaking as if the very utterance of the words choked her.

"You are fanciful," answered the younger sister. "You always were."

Were the words spoken in subterfuge? Jane feared so. "Oh Laura!" she exclaimed in agitation, "I have heard of young ladies allowing themselves to be on these familiar terms with men, receiving homage from them in their vanity, caresses even in their love! Surely nothing of the sort is arising between you and Mr. Carlton?"

Laura made no reply.

"Laura," continued Jane, in a sharp, ringing tone of pain, "*do* you like him? Oh, take care what you are about! You know you could never marry Mr. Carlton."

"I do not tell you that I like him," faltered Laura, some of her courage beginning to forsake her. "But why could I not marry him?"

"Marry *him*! You! The daughter of Captain Chesney marry a common country apothecary! The niece ——"

"There! don't go on, Jane; that's enough," —and the young lady stamped her foot passionately.

"But I must speak. You are Miss Laura Chesney——"

"I tell you, Jane, I won't listen to it. I am tired of hearing who we are and what we are. What though we have great and grand connections,—do they do us any good? Does it bring plenty to our home?—does it bring us the amusement and

society we have a right to expect? Jane! I am tired of it all. There are moments when I feel tempted to go and do as Clarice has done."

There was a long pause—a pause of pain; for Laura had alluded to the one painful subject of the Chesneys' later life. Jane at length broke the silence.

"It would be better for you, even that, than marrying Mr. Carlton," she said in a hushed voice. "Laura, were Mr. Carlton our equal, I could not see you marry him."

Laura turned round from the window now, turned in her surprise. "Why?"

"I do not know how it is that I have taken so great a dislike to Mr. Carlton," continued Miss Chesney in a dreamy tone, not so much answering Laura as communing with herself. "Laura, I *cannot* bear Mr. Carlton; it seems to me that I would rather see you in your grave than united to him, were he the first match in England."

"But I ask you why,"

"I cannot explain it. For one thing—but I don't care to speak of that. You have accused me before now, Laura, of taking prejudices without apparent reason; I have taken one against Mr. Carlton."

Laura tossed her head.

"But—in speaking with reference to yourself—

we have been supposing for argument's sake that he was your equal," resumed Jane. "He is not; he never can be; therefore we may let the subject drop."

"What were you going to urge against him, the 'one thing' that you would not speak of?" returned Laura.

"It may be as well not to mention it."

"But I shall be very much obliged to you to mention it, Jane. I think you ought to do so."

"Well then—but you will think me foolish—Mr. Carlton was so mixed up, and unfavourably, with that dreadful dream I had of Clarice on Monday night. I never liked Mr. Carlton, but since that night I seem to have had a horror of him. I cannot help this, Laura; I daresay it is very foolish; but—we cannot account for these things."

How foolish Laura Chesney thought it, the haughty contempt of her countenance fully told. She would not condescend to answer it; it was altogether beneath her notice; or she deemed it so.

Jane Chesney took her work-basket and sat down near the lamp. She was looking at some work, when a violent knocking overhead of Captain Chesney's stick was heard, and Lucy came flying down the stairs and burst into the room.

"Oh Jane!" she exclaimed, "Lady Oakburn's dead."

Jane dropped her work; Laura moved to the table, aroused to excitement.

"Dead!" repeated Jane. "And when she wrote to me last week she was so well!"

"Jane, Jane, you don't understand," said the child. "It is young Lady Oakburn; not our old aunt the dowager. And a little baby has died with her."

The thumping of the stick overhead had never ceased. Jane, recovering her scared senses, ran upstairs, the others following her. Captain Chesney was on his couch, all turmoil and impatience, rapping incessantly; and Mr. Carlton sat near him, evidently at a loss to comprehend what caused the tumult. A shaded candle was on the table, but the blaze of the fire fell full on the surgeon's impassive face, curious and inquiring now. It appeared that he had been conversing with his patient when Lucy saw something in the "Times" newspaper, which was lying partially folded on the table, having only recently been brought in, and she read it out aloud to her father.

Captain Chesney lifted his stick and brought it down on the table after his own fashion, as they entered. "Take up that newspaper, Jane," he exclaimed, "and see what it is that Lucy has stumbled upon in the deaths."

Jane Chesney ran her eyes downwards from the

top of the column, and caught sight of something in the notice of births, which she read aloud.

"On the 12th instant, in South Audley Street, the Countess of Oakburn of a daughter."

Then in the deaths:—

"On the 14th instant, in South Audley Street, aged twenty-one, Maria, the beloved wife of the Earl of Oakburn."

"On the 14th instant, in South Audley Street, Clarice, the infant child of the Earl of Oakburn."

Jane's voice ceased, and the captain brought his stick on the floor with one melancholy thump, as did Uncle Toby his staff, in the colloquy with Corporal Trim.

"Gone!" uttered he. "The young wife gone before the old grandmother!"

"Did you know the parties, sir!" asked Mr. Carlton.

"Know them, sir!" returned the choleric captain, angry at having, as he deemed, so foolish a question put to him, "I ought to know them, for they are my blood relations."

"I was not aware of it," said Mr. Carlton.

"No, sir, perhaps you were not aware of it, but it's true, for all that. My father, sir, was the Honourable Frank Chesney, the second son of the ninth Earl of Oakburn and brother to the tenth earl; and the late earl, eleventh in succession, and

father of the present earl, was my own cousin. It's a shame that it should be true," continued the captain, his stick noisily enforcing every other word, "a shame that I should be so near the peerage of England, and yet be a poor half-pay navy captain! Merit goes for nothing in this world, and relationship goes for less. If the late earl had chosen to exert himself, I should have been an admiral long ago. There *have* been Admiral Chesneys who distinguished themselves in their day, and perhaps I should have made no exception," he concluded, with a violent accession of the stick accompaniment.

"They named the little child 'Clarice,' you see, papa," observed Jane, after a pause.

"As if the old dowager would let them name her anything else!" cried the captain. "You don't know the Dowager Countess of Oakburn, probably, Mr. Carlton; the present earl's grandmother?"

"No, sir, I do not."

"You have no loss. She is his grandmother, and my aunt; and of all the pig-headed, selfish, opinionated old women, she's the worst. When Jane was born"—nodding towards his daughter—"she says to me, 'You'll name her Clarice, Frank.' 'No, I won't,' I said, 'I shall call her by her mother's name,'—which was Jane. The same thing over again when Laura was born. 'You'll name *her*



Clarice, Frank, and I'll stand godmother,' cries the countess. 'No I won't,' I said, 'I shall name her after my sister Laura'—who had died. And then my lady and I had a lasting quarrel. Her own name's Clarice, you see. Yes! I am as near as that to the great Oakburns (who are as poor as church mice for their rank, all the whole lot), and I'm a half-pay captain, hard up for a shilling!"

"Are there many standing between you and the title, sir?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"There's not one between me and the title," was the answer. "If the earl should die without children, I become Earl of Oakburn. What of that? He is a young man and I am an old one. He'll soon be marrying again, and getting direct heirs about him."

"I think if I were as near the British peerage as that, I should be speculating upon reaching it," said Mr. Carlton, with a genial laugh.

"And prove yourself a fool for your pains," retorted the blunt sailor. "No; it's bad enough looking after old men's dead shoes; but it's worse looking after young ones'. I thank goodness I have not been idiot enough for that; I never, sir, allowed myself to glance at the possibility of becoming Earl of Oakburn: never. There was also another heir before me, the young earl's brother, Arthur Chesney, but he died. He got into a

boating row at Cambridge a year or two back, and was drowned. Jane, you must see to the mourning."

Jane's heart sank with dismay at the prospect of the unexpected cost. "Need we go to the expense, papa?" she faltered.

"Need we go to the expense!" roared the captain, his tongue and his stick going together, "what do you mean? You'd let the young countess go into her grave, and not put on mourning for her? You are out of your senses, Miss Chesney."

Mr. Carlton rose. He buttoned his coat over his slender and very gentlemanly figure, and contrived to whisper a word to Laura as he was departing.

"Be at ease, my darling. You *shall* be mine. Should they deny you to me, I will steal you from them."

Her hand was momentarily in his; his breath mingled with hers, so low had he bent to her; and Laura, with a face of crimson and an apprehensive heart, glanced round to see if Jane was watching. But Jane had stooped over the gouty foot, in compliance with some sudden demand of Captain Chesney's.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### MR. CARLTON'S DEMAND.

A SHORT while went by, just a week or two, and the excitement caused by Mrs. Crane's death was beginning in some degree to subside. No discoveries had been made, no tidings obtained as to who she was or what she was; no light whatever had arisen to clear up the mystery of her death. It is just possible the police did not bestir themselves in the search so actively and perseveringly as they might have done; there were no distressed surviving relatives to urge them on; there was no reward offered as a spur to exertion: and the poor young lady, who had arrived so strangely at South Wenlock, apparently friendless and unknown, seemed likely to remain unknown.

Things were progressing at the house of Captain Chesney. Progressing to an issue that not one of its inmates as yet dreamed of. The Captain himself was *not* progressing. Through some imprudence of his own he had been thrown back in his recovery, and was still a prisoner to his room.

The crape band placed on his hat for the young Countess of Oakburn had not yet been worn, and Jane Chesney was already beginning to be in trouble over the bills, sent in for the mourning of herself and sisters. The disagreeable servant Rhode had departed, and Judith Ford had entered the house in her place.

So far, so good. But that was not all.

The relapse of Captain Chesney afforded an excuse for the more frequent visits of Mr. Carlton. The fractious invalid complacently set them down to anxiety for himself, and thought what an attentive doctor he possessed. Jane was half in doubt whether the two visits daily—the short one in the morning, snatched while Mr. Carlton was on his round to his other patients; the long, gossiping one in the evening—had their rise in any motive so praiseworthy: but as she saw no further reprehensible signs of intimacy between the surgeon and her sister, she hoped for the best.

Unknown to Jane Chesney, however, Mr. Carlton and Laura did contrive to snatch occasionally sundry stolen moments of interview. In one of these, Mr. Carlton told her that the time had come for his speaking out to Captain Chesney. His father, who had been—he emphatically said it—a bad father to him for years, who had turned a resolutely deaf ear to any mention of his son's possible marriage, who

would never suffer a hint of such a future contingency to be mentioned in his presence, nay, who threatened to invoke all kinds of ill upon his head if he contracted one, had suddenly veered round to the opposite extreme. Nothing brings a bad or careless man to his senses sooner than to find himself struck down with unexpected or desperate sickness, where the grave is seen as a near vista, its portals already opening. Such an illness had overtaken Mr. Carlton the elder, and perhaps had been the means of changing his policy. One thing it certainly effected: a reconciliation with his son. From his residence in the east of London, a handsome house in a bad district, where he lay, as he thought, dying, he sent forth a telegraphic summons to his son at South Wennoek, as you have already heard tell of; and though the immediate danger was soon over for the time, some of its penitential effects remained. Mr. Carlton urged marriage upon his son now, telling him it would keep him steady, and he made him a present of a good sum towards the setting up of his house for the reception of a wife.

The money was only too welcome to Lewis Carlton; nobody but himself knew how he had been pushed, how pinched. He paid certain debts with some of it, and the rest he was appropriating to its legitimate purpose—the decorating and embellishing

of his house inside. Many articles of new and costly furniture were ordered to come in ; and Mr. Carlton spared no pains, no money, to make it comfortable for her whom he loved so passionately—Laura Chesney.

It never occurred to him that he could be eventually refused. A demur at first he thought there might be, for Laura had confessed to him how exacting her family was on the score of birth, and Mr. Carlton had no birth to boast of, hardly knew what the word meant. But if Laura had birth, he had a good home, a rising practice, and the expectation of money at his father's death ; and he may be excused for believing that these advantages would finally weigh with Captain Chesney.

With Mr. Carlton, to determine upon a thing was to do it. He had no patience, he could not wait and watch his time ; what he resolved to have, he must have at once. This acting upon impulse had cost him something in his life, and perhaps would again.

He did as he resolved. He spoke out boldly, and asked Captain Chesney for his daughter Laura. The captain received the offer—well, you had better hear how he received it.

It was proffered at an hour when Jane and Laura were out. Mr. Carlton had an instinctive conviction that Jane Chesney would be against him, and

Laura had confirmed him in it ; therefore he judged it well to speak when she was out of the way. The captain's consent gained, he could snap his fingers metaphorically at Miss Chesney. He had paid his morning visit to the captain, and then gone further up the hill to see other patients, but he was not long, and as he was returning he saw the two Miss Chesneys come out of the gate, in their black silk dresses, and go toward the town. They did not see him. A moment's hesitating pause in his own mind, and Mr. Carlton entered. Lucy came looking from the drawing-room as he invaded the hall, and he went into the drawing-room with her, while Pompey went up to inquire if his master would allow Mr. Carlton five minutes' private conversation.

"Are you drawing?" Mr. Carlton asked, as he saw the signs of employment on the table.

"Yes," replied Lucy, "I am so fond of drawing, especially landscapes. Jane draws beautifully; she teaches me. Laura likes music best. See, I have to fill in these trees before Jane comes home; she set me the task."

"You won't half do it," said Mr. Carlton, looking down at the cardboard at which Lucy was now working steadily. "You will be wanting to run away to play, long before that's done."

"I may want perhaps, but I shall not do it. I

would not disobey Jane. Besides, it is my duty to attend to my studies."

"Do you always do your duty?" inquired the surgeon, with a smile.

"Not always, I'm afraid. But I try to do it. Mr. Carlton, I want to ask you something?"

"Ask away, young lady," said he.

Lucy Chesney laid down her pencil, and turned her sweetly earnest eyes on Mr. Carlton; they were beaming just now with saddened light.

"Was it really true that that poor sick lady was poisoned wilfully?—that some wicked man put the prussic acid in the draught?"

How his mood changed! The question appeared to excite his ire, and an impatient word escaped him.

"What have I done now?" exclaimed Lucy in excessive wonder. "Ought I not to have asked it?"

"I must beg your pardon, Miss Lucy," he said, recovering his equanimity. "The fact is, I have not had a moment's peace since the inquest. South Wenlock has done nothing but din these questions into my ears. I think sometimes I shall be turned into prussic acid myself."

"But was it wilfully done?" persisted Lucy, forgetting the rebuff in her anxious curiosity.

"That question had better be asked of Mr.



Stephen Grey : perhaps he can answer it. No, of course it was not wilfully done."

"And, Mr. Carlton, please tell me, have they found out whose face that was upon the stairs?"

A sudden shade arose to the face of Mr. Carlton, discernible even by Lucy. The child thought it looked like dread.

"That was all nonsense," said he. "There was no face there."

"The captain says Misser Doctor go up," interrupted the black servant, coming in with his broken English. And Mr. Carlton went.

Captain Chesney was a prisoner still, as to his legs ; they were raised on the rest. A table was on one side of him, bearing various articles that he might want, and his stick at hand on the other.

"What are you back for?" he asked, with some abruptness.

"I have a petition to make to you, Captain Chesney," began the surgeon, as he took, uninvited, a chair opposite the invalid, and perhaps for the first time in his life Mr. Carlton may have been conscious of a nervousness of manner quite foreign to him. "I have been hoping to speak to you these many weeks, and the time has at length come when I trust I may do so without great presumption. Before I enter upon my immediate subject, you will allow me a word of explanation as to who I am.

My father is a medical man in London, in extensive practice ; I am his only child, and expect at his death to inherit something very considerable. I think—I fear—that death will not be long delayed, and then I shall be what may be called a rich man.”

“ Sir,” interrupted the plain-spoken sailor, “ wherefore tell me this ? Were your father Chancellor of the Exchequer, and could endow you with the country’s revenues, it would be no business of mine.”

A flush rose to the brow of Mr. Carlton.

“ Permit me a moment yet, Captain Chesney, while I speak of myself. I am well established here ; am getting into extensive practice—for the Greys are going down ; and down they will go, after that fatal mistake of Mr. Stephen’s. In a little time, sir, I expect to be netting a thousand pounds a year.”

“ But what is it all to me ? ” wondered the captain. “ I’m sure you’re welcome to it.”

“ Even had I only that in prospect, it would not be so bad an income ; but when my father’s money is added to it, I shall hold my own with any one in Wennock. Captain Chesney, I want one to share this with me. I want you to give her to me. Your daughter.”

Mr. Carlton spoke in a low tone of emotion, and it may be doubted whether the captain heard him

aright. Certain it is that he made no reply, but stared at Mr. Carlton as if he had become moon-struck.

"I speak of Miss Laura Chesney," continued the surgeon. "Oh, sir, give her to me! I will make her a loving husband. She shall want for nothing to render her happy that the most anxious care and tenderness can bestow."

Captain Chesney wondered whether he himself had gone mad, or whether Mr. Carlton had. He had a firm conviction that it must be one or the other. He no more believed it within the range of possibility that any common country practitioner should presume to aspire to an alliance with the aristocratic family of Chesney, than that he, the captain, should dare to aspire to one of the royal princesses. His stick trembled ominously, but did not as yet come down.

"WHAT did you say, sir?" he demanded, with set teeth.

"Sir, I love your daughter; I love Laura Chesney as I have never yet loved, and never shall love another. Will you suffer me to make her my wife?"

Down came the stick in all its thunder, and out roared the captain's voice as an accompaniment, shouting for Pompey. The black servant flew up, as if impelled by something behind him.

"Was massa ill?"

"Ill!" chafed the captain. "*He* is!" he added, pointing the stick at Mr. Carlton. "He's mad, Pompey; gone stark staring mad: you've shut me up here with a mad fellow. Get him out of the house, somehow."

The bewildered Pompey stood in confusion. He knew his choleric master said anything that came uppermost, and he glanced at the calm face, the still, self-possessed bearing of Mr. Carlton; certainly he looked like anything but a madman.

Mr. Carlton rose, his manner haughty, his voice cold. "Captain Chesney, I am a gentleman; and my proposal to you at least required courtesy. Have the kindness to favour me with an intelligible answer."

"I'll be shot if you get any other answer from me. You *are* mad, sir; nobody but a fool or a madman would dream of such a thing as you have now been proposing. Do you know, sir, that my daughter is a CHESNEY?"

"And I am a Carlton. If the names were to be picked to pieces in the Herald's College, the one might prove equal, if not superior to the other."

"Why—goodness bless my soul!" retorted the amazed captain, "you—you are a common apothecary, sir—a dispenser of medicine! and *you* would aspire to a union with the family of Chesney?"

"I am a member of the Royal College of Sur-

geons," angrily repeated Mr. Carlton, who was beginning to lose his temper.

"If you were the whole College of Surgeons rolled into one,—their head, and their tail, and their middle,—you wouldn't dare to glance at my daughter, had you any sense of propriety within you. Do you mean to show this gentleman out, you rascal?" added the inflamed captain, menacing with his stick the head of the unhappy Pompey.

"Door open, Misser Doctor," cried Pompey. But Mr. Carlton motioned him away with a gesture of the hand.

"Captain Chesney, I have told you that I love your daughter; I have told you that my prospects are sufficiently assured to justify me in marrying. Once more I ask you—will you give her to me?"

"No, by Jove!" raved the captain, "I'd see your coffin walk first. Here—stop—listen to me; I'd rather see *her* in her coffin, than disgraced by contact with you. You wed Laura Chesney? Never, never."

"What if I tell you that her hopes—her life, I may almost say—are bound up in me?" cried Mr. Carlton in a low tone.

"What if I tell you that you are a bad and wicked man?" shrieked the captain. "How dared you take advantage of your being called into my house professionally, to cast your covetous eye on any of

my family? Was that gentlemanly, sir? was it the act of a man of honour? You confounded old idiot, standing there with your great goggle eyes, what possesses you to disobey me? Haven't I ordered you to show this—this person—to the door!"

The last two sentences, as the reader may divine, were addressed to the bewildered Pompey. Mr. Carlton wore a resolute expression of face just then. He took it with him, and stood before Captain Chesney, folding his arms.

"It is said in Scripture, that a woman shall leave father and mother, and cleave unto her husband. I would ask you a question, Captain Chesney. By what right, her affections being engaged, and my means suitable, do you deny me your daughter?"

"The right of power, sir," was the sarcastic retort. "And, now that I have answered your question, allow me to ask you one. By what right did you seek her affections? You came into my house with one ostensible object, and clandestinely availed yourself of your footing in it to pursue another! Sir, you had no right to do this, and I tell you that you are a sneak and a coward. Begone, Mr. Surgeon; send me up your bill, when you get home, and never attempt to put your foot inside my door again, or to cast a thought to Miss Laura Chesney."

That is easier said than done, Captain Chesney," concluded Mr. Carlton, but he did not turn to leave.

"Now, you black villain! the door, I say; and both of you may thank your stars that I am this day powerless, or your skins might learn what it is to beard a quarter-deck commander."

But Mr. Carlton was already out, and Pompey also. A good thing that they were, for the stick of the roused captain came flying through the air after them; whether meant for one or the other, or both, the sender best knew. It struck the door-post and fell clattering on the floor, denting another dent into the gold top, which already had so many dents in it—as the meek Pompey could testify.

Leaning against the door, shivering and sick, was Lucy Chesney. The noise in the chamber had attracted her notice, and she ran up, but stopped at the entrance, too terrified to enter. She touched the arm of Mr. Carlton.

"Oh, tell me what has happened? I heard Laura's name. What has she done?"

Mr. Carlton shook off her hand, and moved forward, buried in thought. Before he had descended above a stair or two, his recollection apparently came to him, and he went back to the child.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear; it is nothing to tremble at. I made a proposition to Captain

Chesney, and he forgot his good manners in answering it. It will be all right; mind, I tell you that it will, and you may tell Laura so, from me. Forgive my having passed you rudely, Lucy; at that moment I was not myself."

He quitted the house, turned out at the gate, and there came face to face with the Misses Chesney. Something that they intended to take to the town with them had been forgotten, and they were returning for it. Mr. Carlton stood before them and raised his hat. Jane wondered at his presumption in stopping them.

"Can I speak a word with you apart?" he suddenly demanded of Laura.

She blushed violently, but after a moment's indecision would have stepped aside with him, had not Jane interposed.

"You can have nothing to say in private to Miss Laura Chesney, that may not be said in public, Mr. Carlton. I must beg her to decline your request."

In direct defiance to her sister, Laura could not grant it. Mr. Carlton saw she could not, and his resolution was taken. He addressed Laura, allowing Miss Chesney to hear, but taking no more notice of her than if she was not by.

"I have been speaking to Captain Chesney. I have been asking him to allow me to address you,



and he received my proposals as if they were an insult. He would not hear me make them, or listen to any explanation ; he treated me as I should think no gentleman was ever treated yet. Laura, I can now only depend upon you."

She stood before him, her whole face glowing ; frightened, but happy.

"But Rome was not built in a day," added Mr. Carlton. "Brick was added to brick, stone to stone, mortar to mortar, pillar to pillar. Ill as Captain Chesney has this day received me, I forgive him for your sake, and hope the time may come when he will be induced to listen to us. We must both strive to subdue his prejudices."

Jane moved a step forward ; she knew what her own course would be, had the proposition been made to her, and she had little doubt it must have been her father's.

"Has my father forbidden you the house, sir?"

"He has. But, as I say, I and your sister must hope to subdue his prejudices. Miss Chesney," he added, seizing her unwilling hand, "do not you be against us. I cannot give up Laura."

"You say 'against us,'" returned Jane. "In making use of those words it would almost lead to a belief that my sister has an understanding with you in this matter. Is it so?"

"It is," replied Mr. Carlton, in a deep tone ; "the

understanding of *love*. Miss Chesney, it is no child's affection that she and I entertain for each other; it is not one that can be readily put aside, even at the will of Captain Chesney. Will you aid us to overcome his opposition?"

"No," said Jane, in a low but firm tone. "I am deeply grieved, deeply shocked, to hear you say this. What you are thinking of can never be."

"I see," said Mr. Carlton, in a cold accent, "you share Captain Chesney's prejudices against me. Miss Chesney—allow me to say it—they may not yet be unconquerable. I tell you, I tell Laura in your presence, that I will do all I can to subdue them; I will do all I can to win her, for mine she shall be. My darling"—and his voice changed to tenderness—"only be true to me! it is all I ask. I am not to be admitted again to your house; but I shall see you elsewhere, though it be but a chance road meeting, such as this. Good morning, Miss Chesney."

He passed on towards the town, and a conviction of future trouble arose in Jane Chesney's heart as she gazed after him. But she never guessed how bitter that trouble was to be.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE FACE AGAIN.

A CONFLICT was going on in the mind of Laura Chesney. Two passions, bad and good, were at work there, each striving for the mastery.

Should it be obedience or disobedience? Should she bear on in the straight line of duty, and be obedient to her father, to all the notions of right in which she had been reared; or should she quit her home in defiance, quit it clandestinely, to become the wife of Mr. Carlton? Reader! It has indeed come to this, grievous as it is to have to write it, at the present day, of a well-trained gentlewoman.

On the day that Mr. Carlton had asked for Laura, Captain Chesney commanded her before him. He did not spare her; every reproach that the case seemed to demand was lavished upon her by the indignant captain; and he finally forbade her ever to give another thought to Mr. Carlton. The abuse he heaped upon the unconscious surgeon would have been something grand if spoken upon the boards of a theatre; it simply made Laura rebel-

lious. He told her that, except in his professional capacity, he disliked Mr. Carlton, and that nothing in the world would ever induce him to admit the man to his family. And this he confirmed with sundry unnecessary words.

Laura retired, apparently acquiescent. Not to him did she dare show disobedience, and the captain concluded that the affair was settled and over. Whether Laura's rebellious feelings would have subsided afterwards into duty had she been let alone, it is impossible to say; but Mr. Carlton took every possible occasion of fostering them.

He did not want for opportunity. Laura—careless, wilful, reprehensible Laura—had yielded to his persuasions of meeting him in secret. Evening after evening, at the dusk hour, unless unavoidably kept away by the exigencies of patients, was Mr. Carlton in the dark grove of trees that skirted Captain Chesney's house; and Laura found no difficulty in joining him. The captain and Miss Chesney would as soon have suspected her of stealing out to meet a charged cannon as a gentleman, and Laura's movements were free.

But it was not possible that this state of things could continue. Laura had not been reared to deceit, and she did feel ashamed of herself. She felt also something else—a fear of detection. Each evening as she glided, trembling, into that grove,

she protested with tears to Mr. Carlton that it must be the last; that she *dared* not come again. And suppose she made it the last, he answered, what then? were they to bid each other adieu for ever?

Ah, poor Laura Chesney's heart was only too much inclined to open to the specious argument he breathed into it—that there was but one way of ending satisfactorily the present unhappy state of things; that of flying with him. It took but a few days to accomplish—the convincing her that it would be best for them in every way, and inducing her to promise to consent. So long as she was Miss Laura Chesney, Captain Chesney's obstinacy would continue, he argued; but when once they were married, he would be easily brought to forgive. Mr. Carlton believed this when he said it. He believed that these loud, hot-tempered men, who were so fond of raging out, never bore malice long. Perhaps as a rule he was right, but in all rules there are exceptional cases. With many tears, with many sighs, with many qualms of self-reproach, Laura yielded her consent, and Mr. Carlton laid his plans, and communicated them to her. But for his having been forbidden the house, Laura might never have ventured on the step; but to continue to steal out in fear and trembling to see him, she dared not; and to live without seeing him would have been the bitterest fate of all.

In the few days that had elapsed since the rupture between her father and her lover, Laura Chesney seemed to have lived years. In her after life, when she glanced back at this time, she asked herself whether it was indeed possible that but those few days, a fortnight at most, had passed over her head, during which she was making up her mind to leave her home with Mr. Carlton. Only a few days ! to deliberate upon a step that must fix the destiny of her whole life !

But we must hasten on.

It was about a month subsequent to the death of Mrs. Crane, and the moon's rays were again gladdening the earth. The rays were weak and watery. Dark clouds passed frequently over the face of the sky, and sprinkling showers, threatening heavier rain, fell at intervals.

Gliding out of her father's door, by the servants' entrance, came Laura Chesney. She wore a black silk dress, the mourning for Lady Oakburn, and a black shawl was thrown over her head and shoulders. She stepped swiftly down the narrow side-path which led from this entrance to the foot of the garden, and plunged amidst the thick trees there. It was between eight and nine o'clock, and but for this watery moon would have been quite dark. Laura was later than she had wished to be. Captain Chesney was about again now, and it had

pleased him to keep the tea waiting on the table, before he allowed Jane to make it. Laura sat in a fever of impatience; was Mr. Carlton waiting for her?—and would he go away? Swallowing down one cup of tea hastily, Laura declined more, and, saying she had a headache, quitted the room.

Unheeding the drops of rain which began to fall, unheeding the many drops which fell when the shrubs and trees were shaken, Laura plunged into their midst. Leaning against the trunk of one that was thicker than the rest, stood Mr. Carlton. Laura, who was in a state of perpetual and continuous terror during these interviews, flew to him for shelter.

“O, Lewis, I feared you would be gone! I thought I should never get away to-night. Papa was reading the newspaper, and Jane would not make the tea unless he told her. I dared not come away until it was made, because they would have been calling me to it.”

“Only one night more, Laura, and then it will be over,” was his soothing answer.

At least, he had meant it to soothe. But the step she was about to take seemed to yawn before Laura then in all its naked and appalling sternness.

“I don’t know that I can do it,” she murmured with a shiver. “It is an awful thing. Do you mind me, Lewis?—an awful thing.”

"What is?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"The running away from my father's home. I have read of it in books, but I never knew any one who did it in real life; and now that the time is coming close, I cannot tell you how I seem to shrink from it. We have been brought up to be so obedient."

"Hush, Laura! You are falling into an unnecessarily grave view of this."

She did not answer aloud, but she began asking herself whether too grave a view could be taken of a daughter's leaving clandestinely her father's home. Laura's conscience was unusually alive to-night. A glimmer of the watery moon fell on her face through the trees, and Mr. Carlton saw how grave was its expression. He divined her thoughts, as by instinct, and answered them.

"Laura, believe me, you *can* take too grave a view of it. When a father is unreasonably despotic, a daughter is justified in breaking through her trammels. Surely you are not wavering! Laura, Laura! you will not be the one to frustrate our plans! you will not draw back from me at the last hour!"

She burst into tears. "No, I would not draw back from you," she sobbed. "But—I don't know how it is, I feel to-night frightened at everything; frightened above all at the unknown future."



Mr. Carlton did his best to reassure her. Loving arguments, all too specious; sophistries, whose falseness was lost in their sweetness, were poured into her ear. It was but the old story; one that has been enacted many a time before, that will be enacted many a time again; where inclination and conscience are at war, and the latter yields.

"I could not live without you," he passionately reiterated. "You must not draw back now."

It may be that she felt she could not live without him. She suffered herself to be soothed, to be satisfied. Gradually, one by one, her scruples melted away from her sight; and she discussed with him finally their plans for getting away undetected, unpursued. The time for their purposed flitting was drawing very near; four-and-twenty hours more would bring it.

But it grew late; time for Mr. Carlton to be away, and for Laura to be in-doors again, lest she should be missed. Mr. Carlton, with many a last word and many another, at length quitted her. Laura remained for a few minutes where she was, to still the beating of her agitated heart, to live over again the sweet, stolen interview. Only a few hours, and, if all went well, she should belong to him for ever!

The shrubs and trees around afforded a secure shelter. It was pretty dry there, and she had

suffered the shawl to fall from her shoulders, never heeding where. But now she turned to look for it, and just at that moment the moon burst from behind a cloud, and Laura looked up at its glitter through the leaves of the trees. It was brighter then than it had been yet that night.

Gathering up the shawl, she had thrown it round her, when a cry escaped her lips, and every pulse in her beating heart stood still. There, amidst the trees, stood some one watching her; some one that certainly bore the form of a human being, but a strange one. It struggled itself forward and came nearer; near enough to speak in a whisper, and be heard:

“Laura Chesney, what have you to do with Lewis Carlton?”

She stood paralysed with fright, with awe, leaning against the trunk of a tree, and saying nothing: her hands clutching the shawl, her eyes dilated.

“Have nothing to do with Lewis Carlton,” went on the voice; “if you care for your own happiness, perhaps your life, have nothing to do with him. Ask him what he did to Clarice. Ask him if he deals in poison.”

With the faintest possible rustling, the figure and the voice died away to her sight and hearing. Laura Chesney felt as if her own heart, almost her life, were dying with it.

Now it happened that Mr. Carlton, after letting himself out at the gate, remembered a word he had forgotten to say to Laura, touching those plans of theirs for the following evening. He had gone a few paces down the road when he thought of it; but he retraced his steps, put his hand over the gate, pressed the spring, and turned in again. But a few yards from him, right in front of the path, enveloped in what looked like a travelling cloak and cap, stood a man, a stout and very short man—as it seemed to Mr. Carlton. He supposed it to be some traveller coming perhaps from a journey, who might have business at the house; he supposed he had passed in at the gate in the minute that had elapsed since he himself had passed out of it. Conscious that he was not upon Captain Chesney's premises on pursuits of the most honourable nature, the surgeon felt somewhat embarrassed. At that moment the stranger turned and raised his cap, and to Mr. Carlton's horror he saw beneath it the face he had seen once before.

It was the same face he had seen on the staircase in Palace Street, the night of his patient's death; the same severe face, with its intensely black whiskers, and its ghastly white skin. A creeping horror, as if the dead were about him, overspread Mr. Carlton: he knew not whether the figure before him was ghostly or human; he leaned his brow on

his hand for one single instant to recover self-possession; and when he looked up, the figure was gone.

Gone where? Mr. Carlton could not say, could not think. That it had not come down the path was certain, because it must have brushed past him; and it was equally certain it had not gone on to the house, or it would not yet have been out of sight; neither was he disposed to think it had disappeared amidst the trees, for he had heard no sound of their being moved. He had hitherto considered himself a brave man, a man bolder than the common run, but he was strangely shaken now. The same undefined terror which had unnerved him that other night, unmanned him this. It was not a fear that he could take hold of and grapple with: it was a vague, shadowy dread, perfectly undefined to his mind, partly indistinct; one moment presenting the semblance of a real tangible fear, that might be run from or guarded against; the next, wearing to his conviction but the hues of a fanciful superstition. Never, in all his life, had Mr. Carlton believed in ghostly appearances; he would have been the first to laugh at and ridicule those who did believe in them; most singular, then, was it that the face he had seen that ill-fated night should have conjured up any superstitious fear in his mind of its being a visitant from the other

world; it was singular that the same idea should arise, uncalled for, now.

With a face quite as ghastly as the one he had seen,—with shaking nerves that he strove in vain to steady,—with a sickening fear that ran through every fibre of his frame, Mr. Carlton stood still as death, taking a few moments' respite; and then he penetrated to the spot where he had left Laura Chesney. Not to her did he purpose breathing a syllable of what had passed; what then was his astonishment to find her dart up to him, clasp him tightly for protection, and burst into deep sobs of terror, a terror as great as his own!

"Laura, my love, what means this?"

"Oh, Lewis, did you see it? did you see it?" she sobbed. "That figure which has been here?"

Mr. Carlton's heart beat more violently than before; but still he would not betray that he knew anything.

"What figure, Laura?"

"I don't know; I don't know who or what it was. It was behind me, amidst the trees, and I saw it when I turned to look after my shawl. At the first moment I thought it was a woman, its voice sounded like a woman's, but afterwards I thought it was a man; I don't know which it was."

"Its voice!" repeated Mr. Carlton. "Did it speak?"

"It spoke, and that was the worst; it warned me against you. Otherwise I might have thought it some curious passer-by, who had heard us speaking, and came intruding in at the gate to look. Oh, Lewis!" she added, with a burst of agitation that almost shook Mr. Carlton as well as herself, "it is not true, is it? Lewis! Lewis!"

Her emotion was so excessive that she lost all self-control, all recollection of the necessity for secrecy. Another fear attacked Mr. Carlton—that they might be betrayed.

"Hush, hush!" he whispered. "Be calm, and tell me what you mean. Is what true?"

"It—I say 'it,' because I don't know whether it was a man or a woman—it warned me against you," panted Laura. "It told me that I must have nothing to do with Lewis Carlton; that if I valued my own happiness, perhaps my life, I should not."

"Some envious fool who has penetrated our secret, and who would step between us," interrupted Mr. Carlton in a tone of bitter scorn.

"Hear me out," she continued. "It told me to ask you what you had done with Clarice; to ask if you dealt in poison."

Mr. Carlton stood as one transfixed—as one confounded. "What Clarice?" he presently asked. "Who is Clarice?"

"I don't know," said Laura Chesney, her sobs

subsiding into a wail. "Do you know any one of the name?"

"I do not know any Clarice in the world," he answered.

"But about the poison?" shivered Laura; "what could the words mean? 'Ask him if he deals in poison!'"

"I suppose they meant 'deals in drugs,'" was the answer. "A medical man, in general practice, must deal in such."

There was something in Mr. Carlton's tone that frightened Laura worse than anything that had gone before. She started away to gaze at him. He was looking forward with a vacant stare, as if he had lost all consciousness of the present.

"Was it a pale face, Laura, with black whiskers," he presently asked.

"I could see nothing distinctly, except that the face was ashy pale—or perhaps it only looked so in the moonlight. Why? Have you seen it?"

"I believe I have seen it twice," returned Mr. Carlton. He spoke in a dreamy tone of self-communing, quite as if he had forgotten any one was present; and indeed it seemed that he had lost self-control just as much as Laura had lost it. "I saw it outside that room the night of the death," he continued, "and I saw it again this minute as I was coming back to you."

The particular information, and the associations it conjured up, did not tend to re-assure Miss Laura Chesney.

"The face you saw outside the lady's room in Palace Street?" she said, with a faint shriek. "It never could be *that* face," she added, relapsing into another fit of trembling. "What should bring that face here?"

"I know not," cried Mr. Carlton; and it seemed that he was trembling too. "I am not sure, Laura, that it is either man or woman; I am not sure but it is a ghostly apparition."

"Where did you see it? Where did it go?"

"I saw it in the path, but I did not see where it went. It seemed to vanish. It is either that, or— or—some base villain, some sneaking spy, who steals into houses for his own wicked purposes, and deserves the halter. What should bring him here? here on your father's premises. Was he dodging my steps? or yours?"

"Lewis, whose *was* the face, that night?"

"I would give half my allotted life to know?"

"There was a suspicion that *he* poisoned the draught. I am sure I heard so."

"Just as he would poison the happiness of our lives," exclaimed Mr. Carlton, in agitation;—"as he would have poisoned your mind against me.



Laura, you must choose between me and him ; between his insidious falsehoods and my love."

"Do not speak in that way," she passionately uttered ; "the whole world could not poison me against you. Oh, Lewis, my best-beloved, soon to be my husband, do not be angry with me that I repeated his words ; had I kept them to brood over alone, they would only have rankled in my heart."

"Angry with you," he murmured, "no, no. I am not angry with you. I am angry with—with that wicked one, who would have tried to separate us. One more night and day, my love, and then we may defy him and all the world."

Laura stole back to the house by the path she had come, the side-path leading to the kitchen. Mr. Carlton stood and watched her safely in-doors, and then departed on his way to his home. The garden, for all that could be seen of it, was perfectly free from intruders then, and Mr. Carlton could only believe it to be so.

But as he went down the road, lying so fanciful and still—still in the calm night, in its freedom at that hour from passengers, fanciful with its quaint patches of light and shade—Mr. Carlton walked as though he feared an enemy at every turn. Now he peered before him, now he glanced over his shoulder behind him, now he half turned to see what might be by his side ; and once, as an old hare, lurking

in the hedge, sprang out before him and scudded to the field opposite, he positively started from it with a sudden cry. Strangely unnerved that night was Mr. Carlton.

And Laura, after all, did not escape without detection. It happened, subsequently to the removal of the tea from the drawing-room, that Miss Chesney wanted an embroidery pattern, and went to Laura's bed-room to ask her for it. Laura was not there: and Jane, fancying she heard a movement overhead, turned to the foot of the upper stairs, and called.

It was not Laura who was up there, but the maid, Judith. She came out of her chamber, looked down, and saw her mistress standing below.

"Did you speak, ma'am?"

"I called to Miss Laura, Judith. Is she up-stairs?"

The only room in which Laura was likely to be, if she was up-stairs, was the one occupied by Jane. Jane Chesney, ever self-denying, had given up the best lower rooms to her father and Laura, herself and Lucy sleeping above. Judith went and looked inside the chamber.

"No, ma'am, Miss Laura is not here. I'm sure she has not come up-stairs, or I should have heard her."

Jane called again, but there was no answer.

She looked everywhere she could think of, and at last went into the kitchen. Pompey was there alone.

"Pompey, do you know where Miss Laura is?"

Pompey was, as the saying runs, taken to. He had had his eyes and ears open this last week or two, and had not been unconscious of Miss Laura's stolen interviews outside the house in the dusk of evening. Pompey had no idea of making mischief; old Pompey was fond of pretty Miss Laura, and had kept the secret as closely as she could have kept it; but on the other hand Pompey had no idea, could have no idea, of denying any information demanded of him by his mistress, Miss Chesney. So Pompey stood and stared in bewildered indecision, but never spoke.

"I ask you, Pompey, if you know where Miss Laura is," repeated Jane, certain anxieties touching Laura taking sudden possession of her and rendering her voice sharp. "Why do you not answer me?"

"She there, missee," replied Pompey at length, pointing to the garden. "She not catch cold; she got great big black shawl over her."

"Who is with her? Pompey, I ask you who is with her?"

She spoke with quiet authority, though she had laid her hand on her heart to still its tumultuous

beating; authority that might not be disputed by poor Pompey.

"I think it Misser Doctor. But she no stay over long with him, missee; she never does."

Jane Chesney leaned against the dresser, feeling as if an avalanche had fallen and crushed her; feeling that if an avalanche fell and crushed the house for ever, it would be more tolerable than this disgrace which had fallen on it. In that moment there was a slight rustle of silk in the passage; it whirled by the kitchen door, and was lost on the floor above; and Jane knew that Laura had come in and taken shelter in her room.

Come in from the clandestine meeting with Mr. Carlton the surgeon; and the words of Pompey seemed to imply that these meetings were not altogether rare! Jane Chesney turned sick at heart. The disgrace was keen.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE LETTERS.

AN incident occurred the following morning to cause some surprise at the house of Captain Chesney. When Pompey brought in the letters he presented them to Jane, as was customary. There were three. The first was addressed to Captain Chesney, and Jane immediately handed it to him across the breakfast table; the second was addressed to herself; and the third bore the superscription "The Right Honourable the Earl of Oakburn."

It was not a pleasant morning, for the rain was pattering against the window panes. The breakfast table was laid near the window in the drawing-room, where the captain, in his despotic will, chose that they should breakfast. He had taken a liking to the room; to its pretty glass windows that opened on the lawn.

Captain Chesney unsealed his letter the moment it was handed to him, and became absorbed in the contents. Jane kept glancing at the one addressed to Lord Oakburn, but she would not interrupt her

father to speak of it. When he had finished reading his letter he looked up.

"Are both those for you, Jane?"

"Not both, papa. One is directed to Lord Oakburn. See. I cannot make out why it should have been sent here."

Captain Chesney stretched out his hand for the letter, and turned it about to regard it, after the usual manner of people when a letter puzzles them.

"Yes, it is for him, sure enough. 'The Right Honourable the Earl of Oakburn, Cedar Lodge, the Rise, South Wennock,' " continued he, reading the full superscription aloud. "He must be coming here, Jane."

"I suppose he must, papa. It is the only conclusion I can draw."

"Very condescending of him, I'm sure," growled the captain. "It's an honour he has not accorded me since he was at Eton. What is bringing him here, I wonder? Wants change of scene perhaps."

Jane took alarm. "You don't think he can be coming here to stay, papa? We have nothing fit to receive him; no establishment, no accommodation. He cannot surely be coming to stay!"

"If he comes he must take things as he finds them. I shall not put myself out of the way, neither need you. 'Not able to do it, my lord,' I shall say to him; 'Frank Chesney's too poor; had

his family bestirred themselves, old Frank might have carried his head a notch higher.' All you need do, Jane, is to see that he has a shake-down, a hammock slung for him somewhere. I suppose that can be managed; there's the spare room off mine; and for the rest, let him take what he finds."

"Still I can hardly understand why he should be coming," resumed Jane, after a pause. "He——"

"Is he in London, or at Chesney Oaks?" interrupted Lucy, looking up from her bread-and-milk.

"At Chesney Oaks, my dear," said Jane. "He went down a month ago, when his poor young wife was buried, and I think he has remained there."

"Whew!" interposed the captain, "I can understand it. He is coming cutting across the country from Chesney Oaks to Great Wennock for a day or two on some political business, and so intends to make a convenience of my house to stay in and to have his letters sent to. *Very* condescending of him indeed!"

"Papa," said Lucy, somewhat anxiously, "don't you like Lord Oakburn?"

"Well—yes, I like *him* well enough, what I know of him; but I hold that I had great grievances against his father. What's the post-mark of the letter, Jane?"

Jane Chesney turned the letter over and made out the mark "Pembury." It was the post-town in the vicinity of the Earl of Oakburn's seat, Chesney Oaks.

"He must have started then, I should think," remarked Jane, "and this has been sent after him."

"How did he know our address here, papa?" asked Lucy.

"How did he know our address here?" repeated the captain, in choler. "What should hinder his knowing it? Do I live with my head under a bushel, pray? When I changed from Plymouth to this neighbourhood, the family received intimation of it; and didn't I write to the earl the other day when his wife died? Was I not asked to the funeral, stupid; and couldn't go because of that confounded gout?"

"Lucy's only a child, papa," soothingly interposed Jane. "She does not reflect."

"Then she ought to reflect," said the captain, "and not show herself a simpleton. He'll be wanting another wife soon, I suppose, so you had better look out, Miss Laura, and set your cap at him when he comes. You'd not make a bad countess."

The grim sailor spoke in jest. To give him his due, he was not capable of scheming for his



daughters in any way. Laura, however, seemed to take the words in earnest. She had sat silent over her nearly untasted breakfast, her face bent ; but it was lifted now, flushing with a vivid crimson. Captain Chesney laughed ; he thought his random and meaningless shaft must have struck home to her vanity, exciting visions of a peeress's coronet, pleasing as they were foolish. But Jane, who had also noticed the blush, attributed it to a different cause, and one that pleased her not.

"Papa," resumed Lucy, venturing on another question, "how far is it from this to Chesney Oaks?"

"About thirty miles, little mouse."

"I think I ought to have holiday from my lessons to-day, as Lord Oakburn is coming," continued the child, glancing at Jane.

"Wait for that until he comes," said the captain. "He's as uncertain as the wind ; all young men are ; and it may be days before he gets here. He may"—the captain drew up his head at the thought—"he *may* be coming to consult me on business matters connected with the estate, for I am—yes I am—the next heir, now he's a single man again. Not that I shall ever inherit ; he is twenty-five and I am fifty-nine. Have you the headache this morning, Laura?"

Again came the rush of red to her face. What

self-conscious feeling induced it? "No, not this morning, papa. Why?"

"You are as silent and look as *down* as if you had fifty headaches. Jane," concluded the captain as he rose, "we must have soup to-day, in case he arrives."

Jane acquiesced, with a sigh. This expected coming of Lord Oakburn's was only an additional care to the many household ones that oppressed her.

Breakfast over, the captain strolled out. There was a lull in the storm, and the rain had momentarily ceased. He looked up at the skies with his experienced sailor's eye, and saw that it had not ceased for long. So he did not go beyond the garden, but went strolling about that.

Laura had departed immediately to her room. Jane placed the letter for Lord Oakburn on the mantelpiece and opened the one addressed to herself, which she had not done at breakfast. As she was reading it Captain Chesney came in to ask her for a piece of string to tie up some bush in the garden.

"Is your letter from——"

The captain stopped without concluding the sentence, stopped abruptly, and Jane's heart fluttered. She believed he had been going to say "from Clarice," and she felt thankful that the long barrier of silence observed to her by her father in

regard to that name, should at length be broken. No such thing, however; the captain's obstinacy was unconquerable.

"It is only from Plymouth, papa."

"Oh," said the captain indifferently; and, taking the string which she had been getting for him, he moved away, all unconscious that even in that slight incident she was sparing him pain in her duty and love. The letter was from a creditor at Plymouth, pressing for money on account of some long-standing debt.

Jane set Lucy to her lessons, and then went upstairs to her sister's room. Laura had flung herself upon the bed, and lay there with her hands pressed to her temples. It may be questioned which of the two sisters had passed the most unhappy night. The discovery of the previous evening had been one of dire dismay to Jane Chesney, and she had lain awake in her distress, wondering how it was to end, wondering whether Laura *could* be recalled to a sense of what was right. In her own simple rectitude of feeling, Jane looked on the affair, on Laura's having allowed herself to meet in secret Mr. Carlton, almost as a crime, certainly as a heavy disgrace. And Laura? Laura could not but regard with shrinking fear the step she was about to take. She had tossed on her uneasy bed, asking herself whether she should not yet draw back from it. Even now

the conflict was not over, and she lay there in dire perplexity and distress.

"Laura," began Jane in a low tone as she entered, "this must end."

Laura sprang off the bed, startled and vexed at having been found on it. "I feel tired this morning," she stammered, with a lame attempt at apology; "I did not sleep well last night."

"I say, Laura, this must end," continued Jane, too agitated with grief to set about her task in any artistic manner. "You have permitted yourself to meet in secret that man—the surgeon, Carlton. O, Laura! what strange infatuation can have come over you?"

Laura laid her hand upon her chest to still its heavy beating. Found out! In her dismay and perplexity it seemed to her that there was nothing for it but *denial*. And she stooped to it.

"Who says I have? Whatever will you accuse me of next, Jane?"

"Hush, Laura! falsehood will not mend wrongdoing. Evening after evening you steal out to meet him. Last night I wanted you, and I heard you were outside. I saw you come in, Laura, with the disguising shawl over your head. Laura, my dearest sister, I do not wish to speak harshly, but surely you cannot have reflected on how great is the degradation!"

Strange to say, the effect of the discovery was to harden her. With every moment, now that the first startling shock had passed, Laura's spirit grew more defiant. She made no reply to her sister.

"I speak only for your own sake," pleaded Jane. "It is for your sake I beg you to break off all intimacy with Mr. Carlton. Laura, I feel certain that he is not the man to make you happy, even were attendant circumstances favourable."

"It is a strange prejudice that you have taken against Mr. Carlton!" resentfully spoke Laura.

"I am not singular in it; papa dislikes him also. But, Laura, answer me a question; what end do you, can you, propose to yourself in this intimacy with him?"

Laura coloured, hesitated, and then took courage to speak out. But the answer was a partially evasive one.

"Mr. Carlton speaks of marriage. In time, when all your prejudices shall be overcome."

"Do not cherish it, do not glance at it," said Jane with emotion. "Our objections to Mr. Carlton never can be overcome. And I tell you that he would not make you happy."

"We must see—wait and see. If the worst comes to the worst, and everybody remains obdurate, we must then—we must then—join common cause against you for ourselves."

Laura spoke with agitation, but her agitation was as nothing compared to that which seized upon Jane at the words. It was impossible for her to mistake their hidden meaning. Her lips were white, her throat was working, and she held her sister's hands in hers.

"You do not know what you say. Never so speak again; you would not, were you to weigh your words. I pray you—Laura, by the remembrance of our dead mother I pray you—never suffer so mistaken a thought to enter your mind, as that of quitting clandestinely your father's house to become a wife. A marriage entered upon in disobedience and defiance could not prosper. Laura, I don't think you are happy."

Laura burst into a flood of hysterical tears and laid her face down on the dressing-table almost in abandonment. Never had the inward conflict between right and wrong been so great as at that moment. Which should she give up? her father, her friends, her duty?—or him whom she loved with that all-impassioned love?

Jane stooped to kiss her. "Let it end from this day," she whispered. "Do not again forget what is due to yourself and to us by running out of the house for any stolen interview. It is not seemly; it is not right."

Jane quitted the room; it was best to leave

Laura's sobs to subside alone. As she descended the stairs and passed the staircase window, she saw her father coming up one of the garden paths. Almost at the same moment, a blow, a crash of glass, and a shriek of terror, sounded from below. Jane flew down the stairs; Judith rushed forth from the kitchen; and Pompey, his great eyes glaring, emerged from some peculiar sanctum of his own, sacred to knives and boots. They stared at each other in the hall.

"Who is it?" exclaimed Jane. "What has happened? I thought it must be you, Pompey, come to harm amidst the bottles."

"Don't stand there asking who it is," burst from the choleric captain, as he came flinging into the hall. "It's Lucy. She has fallen against the drawing-room window, and perhaps killed herself."

They ran to the drawing-room. Lucy lay on the carpet close to the window, which opened, you know, on the ground. In running heedlessly towards it to say something to her father, her foot had slipped and she fell with her arms against the window, breaking two of its panes. The palm of one hand was cut, and the inside of the other wrist. They raised her and placed her in a chair, but the wrist bled dreadfully. Judith grew pale.

"There may be an artery divided, sir," she whis-

pered to her master. "If so, she may bleed to death."

"You rascal, to stand there gaping when the child's dying!" cried the hot captain. "Go along and get help."

"Is it Misser Carlton I am to get?" asked the unlucky Pompey.

Down came the captain's stick within an inch of Pompey's head, and Laura, all dismayed at the disturbance, came in just in time to hear the captain's answer.

"That villain Carlton! No, sir, not if the whole house were dying together. Get Mr. Grey here, you useless animal. Not the one who poisoned the lady's draught, sir, do you hear? He shouldn't come within a mile of me. Find the other one, and be quick over it."

Poor, affectionate, well-meaning Pompey would certainly have been as quick as his best legs allowed him, but he was saved the trouble of using them. At the very instant they were speaking, Mr. John Grey was seen driving past in his gig. Judith ran out.

The groom heard her call, and pulled up, and Mr. Grey hastened in with Judith when he found what was the matter. In ten minutes the wounds were washed and strapped together with adhesive plaster. Lucy had cried very much with terror.



"Shall I die? Shall I die?" she asked of Mr. Grey, her little heart beating, her hands trembling.

"No, of course not," he replied. "What made you think of that?"

"I heard them talk about my dying; I am sure I did," sobbed Lucy, who was of an excitable and also of a timid temperament. "I heard them say that perhaps the artery was divided: does that kill people?"

"Not always," said Mr. Grey. "Keep your hands still, like a brave little girl."

"Are you sure I shall not die?"

"Quite sure; you are not in any danger. Look here," he added, turning up his coat-sleeve and wristband, and exhibiting his wrist to Lucy, while the others stood around, the captain in rather a subdued mood. "Do you see that scar?"

"Yes, sir," was Lucy's answer.

"Well, once, when I was younger than you, I fell against a window just as you have done, and cut my wrist. There was danger in my case, and shall I tell you why?—the cut divided the artery. Though who made you so wise about arteries," added Mr. Grey, smiling, "I don't know. But you see, Miss Lucy—I think I heard them call you Lucy, and I like the name, it was my mother's—you see, where there is great danger there is generally great help. My father, a surgeon, was in the room when I did

it: he took up the artery immediately, and the danger was past. Now, with this foolish little hurt of yours, although the strappings of diachylon look so formidable, there has not been any danger, for the artery is not touched. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," replied Lucy, "and I believe you. I shall not be afraid now. Shall you come and see me again?"

"I will come in this afternoon just to see that the strappings remain in their places. And now, good-by, and be sure you keep your hands still."

"I think there must be holiday after this," said Jane, with a smile.

"Oh, decidedly holiday," returned Mr. Grey, nodding pleasantly to Lucy. "Nursing to-day, lessons to-morrow."

Captain Chesney went out with him, and linked his arm within his. A rare condescension for the captain, and one that proved he had taken a fancy to Mr. Grey.

"She will do well, Captain Chesney, and I am glad I happened to be passing. It might have been an awkward accident."

"Sir, I thank you," said the captain; "and sir, I see that you are a gentleman, and a man to be esteemed. And I can only regret one thing."

"What is that?" inquired Mr. Grey.

"That I ever took up with that fool of a Carlton.

I dislike him, sir, and he shall never darken my doors again : he has proved *himself* anything but a gentleman. He's not fit to tie your shoes, socially, Mr. Grey, I can tell you that ; and I don't suppose he is, professionally."

John Grey laughed, said a word to the captain to set him right as to Mr. Carlton's professional skill, which was really superior, ascended to his gig amidst the pelting rain, and drove away.

The day went on. The evening post brought another letter for the Earl of Oakburn, though the day had failed to bring the earl himself. They dined at five as usual, and afterwards Captain Chesney went into the town to meet the omnibus from Great Wennock, thinking it might possibly bring the earl, or news of him. It was after his departure that this second letter came, and Jane saw that it bore the London postmark. Mr. John Grey, who had not been able to get up before, called in towards dusk.

As he stood at the table, talking to Jane, Lucy sitting in an easy-chair at the fire, his eye happened to fall on the letter that lay there, directed to the Earl of Oakburn.

"Do you know the earl?" he exclaimed, the remark appearing to escape him involuntarily.

"Yes," replied Jane ; "we are related to him."

"Then perhaps you can tell me how he is?"

"I suppose he is well. We have been expecting him here all day."

"Expecting him here all day!" repeated Mr. Grey in an accent of astonishment. "I beg your pardon, Miss Chesney, I believe I cannot have caught your meaning."

"We have been expecting Lord Oakburn here since the morning," resumed Jane, "and we still expect him here to sleep. This letter and another have come to await him."

"You must, I fancy, be labouring under an error," returned Mr. Grey, in a tone that seemed to say he he did not fully comprehend Miss Chesney. "Lord Oakburn is dangerously ill; ill almost to death. Two days ago, very slight hopes indeed were entertained of him."

"What is the matter with him?" exclaimed Jane, thinking that the letters must contradict Mr. Grey's assertion. "Is he at Chesney Oaks?"

"He is lying at Chesney Oaks, ill of typhus fever. I know it in this way. The day before yesterday I had to go fifteen miles from this, to meet a physician from Pembury: we were to meet half way. He did not come, but sent a friend, another medical man, who explained to me that the first was detained by the alarming illness of Lord Oakburn. He has been staying at Chesney Oaks since the funeral of the countess, went into a house where the fever was

raging, and caught it. On the day I met this gentleman he told me that a few hours would probably terminate his life."

Jane was silent, silent from positive bewilderment. Lucy spoke up from her chair.

"But, Mr. Grey, if Lord Oakburn should not be coming, why should he have his letters sent here?" Lucy felt disappointed; she had been anticipating great pleasure from the visit of Lord Oakburn.

"That is what I am thinking of," said Jane. "It is not only one letter, it is two; the one is from Pembury, the other from London. Unless Lord Oakburn should be intending to come here, why, as Lucy says, should letters be sent to meet him?"

"You may rely upon it that the Lord Oakburn who was lying ill at Chesney Oaks is not intending to come here yet awhile, Miss Chesney. Probably you may know the next heir?"

"Papa is the next heir," said Jane.

"Captain Chesney is the next heir to the earldom of Oakburn?" quickly repeated Mr. Grey.

"Yes, he is."

"Then, my dear young lady, it is explained, I fear," returned Mr. Grey, after a grave pause. "Rely upon it, the young earl is dead; and that these letters are addressed to your father as Earl of Oakburn."

## CHAPTER XX.

### DISAPPEARANCE.

JANE CHESNEY sat in the darkening twilight of the evening, gazing at the outsides of the two letters which had caused so much speculation. The conviction was gradually forcing itself upon her, that the view taken of the case by Mr. John Grey was the only one that offered any reasonable solution; for if the young Earl of Oakburn was lying ill of fever at Chesney Oaks, it was out of the range of probability to suppose that letters would be sent to him to Captain Chesney's house at South Wennock.

Lucy's voice broke the stillness of the long pause that had followed on Mr. Grey's departure. The little girl, gifted with much sensitive feeling, had not liked to speak before, and even now her tones were timid and low.

"Do you think it can be true, Jane—that papa is Earl of Oakburn?"

"I—I think it must be, Lucy. I cannot see anything else that the coming of these letters here can mean."

Lucy rose from her low seat by the fire, and was running to the door. "I'll go and tell Laura," she said; but Jane drew her back.

"Not yet, Lucy. Let us be sure that it is true first. Somehow I do not like to speculate upon it. It is so sad, it is so grievously sad for the young earl to have died like this—if he has died."

Lucy sat down again, disappointed. She had all a child's love of imparting marvellous news. But Laura would be coming down-stairs directly, she supposed, and then Jane would no doubt tell her.

Jane sat on in silence. She was possessed of extreme right feeling, she had no selfishness, was just in her regard for others, and she did not like to dwell upon the probability of this being true—or, as she had phrased it, to speculate upon it. If Lord Oakburn was dead, had been cut off thus early, none would feel more genuine regret for him than Jane. And yet, in spite of this, in spite of herself, certain thoughts intruded themselves and would not be driven back. No more privations, no more pinching, no more care; no more dread of that horrible prison for one whom she so loved, which had been ever present in her mind, a shadow and a dread. Strive as she would, she could not wholly drive these thoughts away from her brain; she *could not* do it; and yet she almost hated and despised herself for their being there.

By-and-by, just as Pompey brought in the lamp, the step of Captain Chesney was heard on the wet gravel. The rain ever since morning had been incessant, drenching; but it had ceased now.

"I can't get any news of Oakburn," said the captain, when he came in. "The omnibus brought no passengers at all to-night. What's that Jane? Another letter for him? Well, it's strange that he should not be here to meet them."

"Papa," said Jane, her pulses beating at what she had to say, "I fear we may have been under a mistake in expecting him at all. Mr. Grey has been here since you went out, and he says Lord Oakburn was lying at Chesney Oaks two days ago, dangerously ill of typhus fever; it was feared then that he had not many hours to live. Mr. Grey thinks it certain that these two letters are for you."

"For me!" repeated the puzzled captain, not having discerned the drift of the argument.

"Yes, papa," replied Jane, bending her head and speaking in a very low tone. "For you, as Earl of Oakburn."

Captain Chesney stared at Jane, and then made her repeat exactly what Mr. Grey had said. It subdued him greatly. He was as unselfish as Jane, and he thought of the young earl's fate, not of his own advancement.

"I'll risk it, Jane, and open one of the letters,"



he said. "If—if it should be all right, why, the poor fellow will forgive me; he was always good-natured. I'll just tell him how it happened, and why I did it. Give me the one that came this morning."

Jane selected the morning's letter, and Captain Chesney opened it. He ran his eyes over its contents, standing by the lamp to do so, and then he sat down in a very humble fashion and in deep silence.

"It's true, Jane," he presently said, with something very like a sob. "The poor lad is gone, and I am Earl of Oakburn."

The letter was from the steward at Chesney Oaks. He wrote to acquaint the new earl of his young master's death, and to request his immediate presence at Chesney Oaks. The earl (as we must henceforth call Captain Chesney) flung it on the table in a momentary access of his customary choler.

"Why didn't the simpleton write to me by my own name?" he exclaimed. "But that steward always was wanting in common sense. Give me the other letter, Jane."

The other letter proved to be from the lawyers in London, solicitors for many years to the Oakburn family. They were offering their services to the new peer.

The new peer seemed to have his work cut out for him. Of course the first obvious step was to depart for Chesney Oaks. With his characteristic impulsiveness, he started up to go; then; without the loss of a minute.

"I can't wait, Jane. What do you say?—stop for tea? Tea! What other rubbish would you like me to stop for? If I can get a gig at the Lion, I may catch the cross-train at Great Wennock. Dead! The poor fellow dead, and none of his kith and kin near him!"

"But, papa, you must take a carpet-bag with you! You will want——"

"I shall take nothing with me," interrupted the earl, catching up his glasses, and buttoning up his coat in a desperate bustle. "You send Pompey after me in the morning to Chesney Oaks with a shirt and my shaving tackle. There! there! I have not a moment to lose, Jane. One kiss apiece, girls, and then—where's Laura?"

Lucy rushed out of the room, calling "Laura, Laura!" The captain rushed after her, as well as the stiffness left by the gout permitted. He caught up his hat and his cloak as he passed through the hall.

"Never mind her, Lucy, I can't wait; she's gone to sleep, I should think. Give her a kiss for me, and ask her how she likes being my Lady Laura."

It all seemed to pass in a minute, before Jane had time to gather her bewildered senses. She said something to him about the danger there might be of his catching the fever, but he was deaf to it all, and walked down the garden path, fastening his cloak. Jane knew how useless it would be to repeat her words, and she stood at the open door with Lucy, and watched him out at the gate by the light of the moon, which had struggled from amidst the grey clouds.

Lucy ran back to the foot of the stairs and called to Laura with all her might. But there came no response.

"I think she must have gone to sleep, as papa said, Jane. How strange!"

"I will see, my dear. You go back to the drawing-room, Lucy, and ring the bell for tea."

A disagreeable fear had come over Jane Chesney's heart that Laura was not up-stairs; that she had stolen out again to the garden to meet Mr. Carlton. She looked into Laura's room and spoke. It was empty.

"Yes! with him again!" she murmured. "I will go after her, for it *shall* not be."

She went softly out at the front door, and walked down the wet gravel in her thin home shoes. But nothing came of it. It was quite evident that her sister was not there; and an idea arose to Jane.

that Laura must have gone out with Mr. Carlton.

Could it be possible that she *had* so far forgotten herself as to go out walking with him at night, in the face and eyes of South Wennock? In the bitterness of the conviction that it was so, Jane almost hoped that they might be met by her father, for she was beginning to find that she was not herself strong enough to cope with this.

She asked for a light, went into Laura's room, and looked for the black cloth mantle and bonnet that she ordinarily wore. They were not in their places: a proof that her suspicions were correct.

Jane stood for a moment, her elbow resting on a chest of drawers, her head pressed upon her hand. She could do nothing, except wait until Laura came in, and then remonstrate with her. "This is the result of my having discovered the meetings in the garden," thought Jane. "She feared to trust herself there again."

Jane returned to the drawing-room. The tea-things waited on the table, and Lucy looked up with an air of expectancy.

"Where's Laura, Jane? Is she coming?"

What was Jane to say to the child? It was very desirable that the fact of Laura's absence from the house should be concealed from her; indeed Jane trusted it would not transpire beyond herself. She

put Lucy off with an evasive answer, and told her she might get out the book of fairy tales again that she had been reading in the afternoon.

"But are you not going to make tea now, Jane?"

"Not just yet, dear. Papa's away, and there's no hurry. I have a bit of work that I will do first."

Of course she so spoke hoping Laura would come in. She reached out her work and did it; very prosy work it was; the mending some wristbands of a shirt of Captain Chesney's. The rain was pouring down again, and the time went on until the clock struck nine: Lucy's bedtime, and the child had not had her tea!

Where could Laura be?

Jane began to feel angry at the suspense, the perplexity altogether. She could not longer delay the tea, and then the household and Lucy would inevitably know of Laura's absence. Just then Judith came in.

"Why, where's Miss Laura?" she exclaimed, in surprise. "I was in her room a minute ago, and found this on the floor, miss. I came in to bring it to her."

It was Laura's purse; the one she ordinarily used. Jane supposed Laura had dropped it from her pocket. It was quite empty. Jane had seen

her recently making a new one with green silk and steel beads; perhaps she had taken that into use.

"Is Miss Laura out?" asked Judith.

There was no denying it; there could be no smoothing the fact down, no plausible excuse offered for it; and Jane Chesney's heart ached with its own pain.

"She—she may have stepped out to purchase something in the town that she was in a hurry for, some trifles for her worsted work," breathed Jane. "She is sure not to be long. I'll make the tea, Judith."

The tea was made and partaken of, and still Laura did not appear. But when the time went on to *ten*, Jane grew terribly uneasy; not that a suspicion of the dreadful truth—all too dreadful as it would in every sense be to Jane—had yet penetrated to her brain.

She threw a shawl over her head, took an umbrella, and went to the garden-gate. There she stood looking up and down the road, as well as the darkness would permit—for the night had become very dark now. Nothing could be seen; nothing heard save the rain as it pattered down.

Judith met her as she returned indoors, divining her uneasiness. "Can I go after her anywhere, Miss Jane?" She was Lady Jane now—but let

that pass. Jane herself never so much as thought of it.

"You should, if I knew where to send," replied Jane. "I can only think that she has taken shelter somewhere, perhaps in a shop, waiting for the storm to abate. We do not know any one in South Wennock."

There was nothing for it but to wait; nothing, nothing. And Jane Chesney did wait until it was hard upon eleven. An idea kept intruding itself into Jane's mind—at first she rejected it as entirely improbable, but it gained ground, redoubling its force with every passing minute—that Laura had been so thoughtless and foolish as to take temporary shelter in the house of Mr. Carlton.

Lucy began to cry; she got frightened: "Was Laura lost?" she asked. Judith came in with a grave face, and Pompey stood outside the kitchen door and stared in discomfort, the hall lamp lighting up the alarm in his eyes. Such a thing had never happened in all his service, and he was longing to ask whether his favourite Miss Laura could be lost—as Lucy had asked.

"Miss Jane," said Judith, apart to her mistress, "I had better go somewhere. Perhaps—perhaps she may have been overtaken by the heaviest of the storm on her way home, and may have stepped into Mr. Carlton's?"

Jane felt almost thankful for the words; they saved her the embarrassing pain of confessing to Judith that her own thoughts tended that way.

"I cannot think she would do so, Judith; but she is very thoughtless; and—Mr. Carlton's house may have seemed like a welcome shelter from the rain. Perhaps—if you don't mind going——"

Judith gave no time for the sentence to be finished. Another instant, and she reappeared in her bonnet and cloak, a large umbrella in her hand.

She went splashing down the Rise. To a quick walker, Mr. Carlton's residence was not more than five minutes' distance from Captain Chesney's, for it was all down hill; but in the present sloppy and muddy state of the road, Judith could not get on so fast, and the church clocks were striking the quarter past eleven when she turned in at the gate.

She turned in and felt somewhat embarrassed, for the house appeared all dark and silent, as if its inmates had retired for the night. Even the coloured lamp was not burning. It certainly did not look as if the young lady were inside the house sheltering; and Judith felt all the awkwardness of ringing them up, with the question—was Miss Laura Chesney there?

She could only do that, however, or return home as she came; and she knocked at the house door.



There was no answer; and presently she rang the night-bell.

Neither was there any answer to that, and Judith rang again and again. At the third ring a window was heard to open at the top of the house, and Judith stepped from her shelter beneath the portico and looked up.

"What's the good of your keeping on ringing like that?" cried a woman's remonstrating voice—which was, in fact, Hannah's. "You might have told by seeing the perlessional lamp unlighted that Mr. Carlton was away from the town."

"Is he away?" asked Judith.

"He went away sudden this evening. Leastways, it was sudden to us, for he didn't tell us of it till he came down from his room with his hat on, and his portmanteau in his hand, and his carriage at the door to take him," continued the voice, in rather an aggravated tone, as if the sudden departure had not altogether given the speaker pleasure. "He said then he was going out, and should not be home for some days."

"Well," said Judith, "it's not Mr. Carlton I want. I came to ask whether one of our young ladies had stepped in here to shelter from the rain."

"Who is your young ladies?" came the next question.

"The Miss Chesneys. One of them went into

town this evening, and, as she's not come home, she must have taken shelter somewhere. We thought perhaps it was here."

"No young lady has took shelter here. There's been nobody here at all but Mrs. Newberry's servant, saying her mistress was worse, so I had to send her on to Mr. Grey's. She was as impudent as could be when she found Mr. Carlton had gone away for some days, wanting to know why he could not have told them of it."

"My young lady is not here, then?"

"She's not here, and she has not been here. I'll make Evan paste a notice on the lamp to-morrow night, 'Mr. Carlton's out of town,'" pursued the voice, wrathfully. "There's no fun in being rung up for nothing, just as you get into your first sleep."

"Well, I'm sorry to have done it," said Judith, "but I couldn't help myself. Good night."

"Good night."

Judith halted at the gate, wondering what should be her next step. As she stood there, a sudden thought, like a ray of light—only not a pleasant ray—flashed upon her, and her mind was suddenly opened to a conviction of the truth. A conviction as sure and certain as though she had seen the drama of the night enacted. Mr. Carlton's sudden journey and Laura's disappearance only too fully proved what the drama had been.

She went home with lagging steps :—why hasten to impart the news she carried ? Her mistress, whose anxious ear had caught the sound of the advancing footsteps, met her at the gate, and saw that she was alone.

“ O Judith ! have you not found her ? ”

“ No, miss. I—I—— ”

“ What ? ” said Jane.

Judith entered upon her task in the best manner that she could, hinting at first very remotely at her fears. Not immediately did the appalling meaning, *the truth*, become clear to the unhappy listener—that Laura Chesney had abandoned her father's home.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### A DELIGHTFUL JAUNT.

SOUTH WENNOCK, as you may readily imagine, was up in arms the following morning. Such a dish of news had not been served out to it since the death of the ill-fated lady in Palace Street. There were *two* dishes now: the accession of Captain Chesney to the earldom of Oakburn, and the elopement of one of his daughters with Mr. Carlton.

Very cleverly had the getting-away been accomplished; and if some mishaps overtook the bride and bridegroom elect before the close of the night's journey, why, they did not materially retard the flight.

Mr. Carlton had laid his plans well. He was a clever plotter. The scheme arranged with Laura was that he should be in his open carriage at dusk, in a lane leading from the Rise, and that Laura should join him there. This lane, called Blister Lane, and other lanes and by-roads, little frequented, led to a small place named Lichford, where some of the railway trains stopped for passengers. It was seven miles distant from South Wennock,

and Mr. Carlton knew that his open carriage would skim over the ground as quickly as any other conveyance ; and it would have this advantage, that nobody but himself would then be cognisant of the departure. He did not dare to appear with Laura at the more frequented station of Great Wennock ; a hundred eyes would have recognised them.

Cleverly did he keep the secret. He went about his business that day as usual, seeing his patients ; he visited them on foot, that his horse might be fresh for the night journey. He said not a word to any one of his invalids of his proposed absence ; it might not have been expedient ; he said not a word at home. He dined as usual ; afterwards he went up-stairs to his room ; and when it grew so dusk that candles had to be lighted, he rang the bell and ordered the carriage round. Not a minute did he keep it waiting at the door, but came down with a portmanteau in his hand. The woman servant was in the hall as he crossed it, and looked at the portmanteau.

" I am going out for a few days," he said.

She was too much surprised to make any reply or ask any question ; it seemed so strange that he should be departing in that sudden manner. Mr. Carlton passed out to the gate, where his carriage waited. Evan was at the horse's head, dressed as usual to accompany his master. It was the same horse which had come to grief that Sunday night ;

Mr. Carlton had had him in use again about a week; Evan had been well much longer.

"I shall not want you with me to-night, Evan," said his master, when he had taken the reins to ascend.

Evan, as Hannah had done, wondered where his master was going; but it was no concern of his, and he was rather pleased to hear he was spared driving on that rainy night. He placed the portmanteau under the seat, and Mr. Carlton settled himself comfortably in, under the protecting head of the carriage.

"You need not wait up for me," said the surgeon.

"And the horse, sir?" returned Evan, opening his eyes.

"The horse will not be back to-night."

He drove away, leaving Evan standing there and looking after him. Mr. Carlton was not a communicative master at any time, but Evan did marvel that he had given no further explanation now. Was he to be up earlier than usual in the morning to receive the horse and Mr. Carlton? All that Evan supposed was, that he was going to some patient where he was likely to be detained for hours. But then, what of the portmanteau?

"Where's the master gone?" was Hannah's rather sharp question to him as he turned into the house.

"Who's to know?" retorted Evan. "He told me I was not to sit up for the horse. I suppose they'll neither of 'em be home to-night."

"To-night!" somewhat sarcastically repeated Hannah. "He's not coming home for some days, so he told me. It's always the way! I wanted to have asked him for three parts of a day's holiday to-morrow, and now I can't take it."

Mr. Carlton drove quickly up the gentle ascent that led to the Rise, and was about to turn into the lane, fixed upon as his place of waiting, when advancing footsteps met his ear.

"Good evening," said Mr. Grey. "A nasty night."

"Very," emphatically pronounced Mr. Carlton. "Have you been far?"

"Only to Captain Chesney's."

"To Captain Chesney's! Why! who is ill there? Not the captain, for I saw him go by my house not half an hour ago."

"I have been to the little girl. She met with an accident this morning; fell against the window and cut her hands badly. You don't happen to have heard mention in the town whether the Earl of Oakburn is dead, do you?" continued Mr. Grey.

Mr. Carlton had heard nothing at all of the Earl of Oakburn: but the name occurred to him as being the one mentioned by Captain Chesney the night of the coroner's inquest. "Why do you ask?" he said.

"Well, I have not heard of his death; but it strikes me that he is dead," replied Mr. Grey. "Two days ago I know that he was lying almost

without hope, ill of typhus fever; and as letters have come to Captain Chesney's addressed to the Earl of Oakburn, I think there's no doubt that the worst has occurred. In fact, I feel sure of it. I thought perhaps you might have heard it named in the town."

Mr. Carlton was a little at sea. He did not understand the allusion to the letters addressed to the Earl of Oakburn which had come to Captain Chesney's.

"Why, if he is dead, Captain Chesney is Earl of Oakburn, and the letters must be meant for him. I have just suggested that view of the thing to Miss Chesney."

Mr. Carlton was of too impassive a temperament to betray surprise. Other men might have dropped the reins in their astonishment, might have given vent to it in fifty ways; him, it only rendered silent. Captain Chesney the Earl of Oakburn? Why, then his daughters were the Ladies Chesney!

"You think it is so?" he asked.

"I don't *think*," said Mr. Grey; "I feel certain of it. Good evening."

"Good evening," repeated the younger surgeon, and touching his horse with the whip, he turned into the lane and waited.

It was a somewhat singular thing, noted afterwards, that John Grey should have encountered both of them on that eventful night, in the very act



of escaping. Laura Chesney, watching her time to steal away unobserved, took the opportunity of doing so when she knew Mr. Grey was in the drawing-room with Jane and Lucy. But she was not to get away without a fright or two.

She stole down-stairs, along the kitchen passage, and out at the back door. There she saw Judith coming from the brewhouse with a lighted candle in her hand, and Miss Laura had to whisk round an angle of the house and wait. When the coast was, as she hoped, clear, she hastened on down the side path, all the more hastily perhaps that she heard the drawing-room bell give a loud peal, and was turning into the broader walk near the gate, where this path and the one conducting from the front entrance merged into one and the same, when she came in contact with Mr. Grey. The drawing-room bell had rung for him to be shown out, but he had forestalled it in his quickness. Laura Chesney's heart gave a great bound, and she felt frightened enough to faint.

"Good evening, Miss Laura Chesney. Are you going abroad such a night as this?"

"Oh no. I—I—I was going to look at the weather," stammered Laura, feeling that the Fates were certainly putting themselves in opposition to her expedition.

"The weather is nearly as bad as it can be,"

observed Mr. Grey. "It may clear up in a few minutes, but only to come on again. We shall have an inclement night. Don't come farther, my dear young lady; it's enough to drown you."

She turned back, apparently all obedience. But she only slipped in amidst the wet trees until Mr. Grey should be at a safe distance. Her heart was beating wildly: her conscience, even then, suggested to her to abandon the project. Of course, people who are bent upon these romantic expeditions cannot be supposed to remember common sense in the flitting; and Miss Laura Chesney had come out in thin kid shoes and without an umbrella. Neither was she wrapped up for travelling; she had not dared to put on any but her ordinary attire, lest it should attract attention, were she met. Mr. Grey gone, she came forth from her hiding-place, and sped on in the mud and rain to the spot in Blister Lane—it was not five minutes' distance—where Mr. Carlton was awaiting her.

He had not waited for her long. Laura went up, panting with agitation and fright. The storm was then pelting cats and dogs, as the children say. Mr. Carlton left his restive horse—for the horse did seem untowardly restive that night—and sprang forward to meet and welcome her. She burst into a flood of tears as he hurried her into the carriage, under cover of its shelter.

Oh, Lewis! I *could* not go through it again," she sobbed. "I was all but stopped by Mr. Grey."

They started. Mr. Carlton drove along at the utmost speed that the lane and circumstances allowed; and Laura gradually regained tolerable composure. But she felt sick with apprehension; her heart was fluttering, her ears were strained to catch any noise behind, so apprehensive was she of enemies in pursuit. Mr. Carlton asked her what it was that had arisen in connection with letters and the Earl of Oakburn, and Laura mechanically answered. In a moment of less agitation, she would have inquired how he came to know anything about it; but the question never occurred to her in this.

"We have been expecting Lord Oakburn all day," she said. "He is related to us; his father and papa were first cousins."

"You have been expecting him?"

"Yes, but he had not arrived when I came away. Two letters have come addressed to him; and therefore we know he must be coming. When Jane was worrying about a room for him this morning, I could have told her, had I dared, that mine would be at liberty."

It was evident that Laura knew nothing of the earl's illness, or the view of affairs suggested by Mr. Grey. Mr. Carlton suffered her to remain in igno-

rance. Did the idea occur to him that the Lady Laura Chesney, daughter of the Earl of Oakburn, might not be so ready to take flight with a country surgeon struggling into practice, as Miss Laura Chesney, daughter of the poor and embarrassed half-pay post-captain, was proving herself to be? It cannot be told. South Wennock had its opinion upon the point afterwards, and gave vent to it freely.

They were within a mile and a half of Lichford, and Mr. Carlton was urging his horse madly along, like a second Phaeton, afraid of missing the train, when there occurred a check. The horse fell down. Suddenly, with as little warning or cause as there had been on that memorable Sunday night, the animal came suddenly down, and the carriage turned over on its side, one of the wheels flying off.

Mr. Carlton and Laura were not thrown out. The hood over their heads, the tight apron over their knees, they were too well wedged in to be spilled. Mr. Carlton extricated himself, he hardly knew how, and got out Laura.

The horse was plunging violently. Planting the terrified girl on the bank as much out of harm's way as it was possible to place her, Mr. Carlton had to turn his best attention to the horse. There was nothing for it but to cut the traces. Fortunately he had a sharp knife in his pocket, and succeeded in

severing them ; and the horse started off into space, it was impossible to tell where.

Here was a pretty situation ! Did Mr. Carlton remember the ridiculous words of the woman who had come to his help on that Sunday night ? Had he been of the same belief that she was, he might surely have taken this upset to be a warning against persisting in the present journey. Mr. Carlton was not half so metaphysical. He simply threw an ugly word after the offending horse, and blamed his own folly for trusting to the surefootedness of an animal that had once fallen.

Mr. Carlton looked around him in the dark night. The rain, which had ceased for half an hour or so, was coming down again violently. Laura shivered against the bank, where he had placed her, too sick and terrified for tears. It was of the utmost importance that they should gain the station for the next train that passed, and be away, if they would escape the pursuit that might follow on detection at South Wennock. But Mr. Carlton did not see how they were to get to it.

He could not leave the disabled carriage in the narrow road ; he could not—at least Laura could not—get to the station without procuring another. He did not know this locality at all personally ; he had never traversed it ; it was a by-road that led to Lichford, and that was all he knew about it.

Whether any assistance was to be obtained or not, he was in complete ignorance.

As he peered about, wondering if anything more human than trees and hedges was between the spot and Lichford, a faint glimmer of light on one side the lane gradually disclosed itself to view through the misty darkness of the night. At the same moment the voice of his companion was heard, its accents full of lamentation and affright.

“What is to become of us? What shall we do? O Lewis! I wish we had never come!”

He felt for her situation more keenly than she could. He implored her to be tranquil, not to give way to fear or despondency; he promised to extricate her from the embarrassment with the best exertion of his best efforts, and moved forward in the direction of the light.

He found that it proceeded from a candle placed in a cottage window. Mr. Carlton shouted, but it elicited no response, so he went close up, through what seemed a complete slough of despond, if mud can constitute that agreeable feature, and opened the door.

The room was empty. A poor room bare of fire, with a clock in one corner and the candle in the window. Mr. Carlton shouted again, and it brought forth an old man from some back premises, in a blue frock and a cotton nightcap.

A thoroughly stupid old man, who was deaf, and looked aghast at the sight of the gentleman. He began saying something about "th' old 'ooman, who had gone to some neighbouring village and ought to have been home two hour afore and hadn't come yet, so he had stuck a candle in the winder to light her across the opposite field." Mr. Carlton explained his accident, and asked whether he could get a conveyance near that would take him on.

"Not nearer nor Lichford," answered the old man, when he had mastered the question by dint of putting his hand to his ear and bending it forward until it nearly touched Mr. Carlton's lips.

"Not nearer than Lichford!" repeated Mr. Carlton. "Are there no houses, no farms about?"

"No, there's nothing o' the sort," the old man rejoined. "There's a sprinkling o' cottages, a dozen maybe in all, atween this and Lichford, but they be all poor folks, without as much as a cart among 'em."

"Halloa! what's to do here?" came forth on Mr. Carlton's ear in hearty tones from the outside. Glad enough to hear them, he hastened out. A couple of labouring men, young and strong, had come upon the overturned carriage in going along the lane to their homes after their day's work. They almost seemed like two angels to Mr. Carlton, in his helpless position.

By their exertions—and Mr. Carlton also gave his aid—the carriage and wheel were dragged under a shed belonging to the old man's cottage. They confirmed the information that no horse or vehicle was to be had nearer than Lichford, and Mr. Carlton was asking one of the men to go there and procure one, when he was interrupted by Laura.

Oh, let her walk! let her walk! she said. She should not dare to trust herself again behind a strange horse that night; and, besides, if they waited they should inevitably lose the train.

"You cannot walk, Laura. Think of the rain—the mud. You can have shelter inside this old man's cottage until the conveyance comes."

But Laura, when she chose, could be as persistent as anybody, and she was determined to bear on at once to Lichford, braving all inconveniences and discomforts. Poor thing! the chance of pursuit, of discovery, appeared to her a vista of terror and disgrace; she had embarked on this mad scheme, and there remained nothing but to go on with it now.

So they started: one of the men carrying Mr. Carlton's portmanteau and a small parcel brought by Laura, and a lantern; the other, bribed well, entering on a search with another lantern after Mr. Carlton's fugitive horse. But it was a comfortless journey, that mile and a half of lane; a wretched



journey. Umbrellas appeared to be as scarce an article in the locality as were carriages; the old man confessed to possessing one—"a old green un, wi' ne'er a whalebone i' th' half o' him,"—but his missing wife had got it with her. How they gained the station, Laura never knew, Mr. Carlton almost as little. He had taken off his overcoat and wrapped it about her; but the rain was drenching them, and both were wet through when they reached the station at Lichford.

When within a few yards of it, the whistle and the noise of an advancing train sounded in their ears. Laura shrieked, and flew forward.

"Lewis, we shall be too late!"

Instinct, more than the lights, guided her through a waiting-room to the platform. Mr. Carlton, in little less commotion than herself, looked about for the place where tickets were issued, and found it closed. The rattle he gave at the board was enough to frighten the ticket-clerk inside, had one been there; which did not appear to be the case: the place maintained an obstinate silence, and the board continued down in the aperture; Mr. Carlton was in a frenzy, and knocked and called, for the train was dashing into the station. Not a soul was about that he could see; not a soul. The labourer with the portmanteau and parcel stood behind him staring helplessly, and Laura had gone through.

Yes, Laura Chesney had gone through, and she stood on the platform hardly knowing what she did, her upraised hands imploring by their gesture that the train should stop. But the train did not stop; it did not even slacken speed. The train went whirling recklessly on with the velocity of an express, and by the light of a lamp that hung in a first-class carriage, Laura saw, quietly seated in it, the form of Captain Chesney.

With a faint cry, with a shiver of dismay, she fell back against the wall. *We* know how different was the object of Captain Chesney's sudden journey, but Laura naturally concluded that he had come in pursuit of her. He did not see her; there was some comfort in that; he had his face bent rather from her, as he conversed with a passenger on the opposite side of the compartment, and never looked towards her at all. Laura stood there in helpless fear, gazing after the train, in expectation that it would stop and backen.

Mr. Carlton came forth from the room in an accession of rage not easily described, at the neglect (as he supposed it) of the officials of the station. *He* looked after the train also, now nearly whirled beyond view, and could not understand why it had not stopped. A man with a band round his hat, who appeared to belong to the station, was advancing leisurely from some remote part of the platform, a

huge lantern in his hand. Mr. Carlton attacked him vigorously.

What was the meaning of this ? Passengers waiting to go by the train, and nobody in attendance to issue tickets ! He'd complain to the Company ; he'd write to the 'Times ;' he'd—he'd—in Mr. Carlton's explosive anger it was impossible to say what he would not do.

The man received it all with stolid equanimity, simply saying in reply that the gentleman was mistaking the trains if he had thought to get tickets for the one just gone by. It didn't stop there.

"Not stop here ?" repeated Mr. Carlton, a little taken aback. "But there is a train stops here about this time ?"

The man shook his head. "One stopped here twenty minutes ago," he said. "The one just gone on never stopped at Lichford yet, since I have been on the service."

And Mr. Carlton, hastily taking out his watch, which he might have consulted before, found that they had lost their intended train by more than twenty minutes, thanks to the accident.

When does the next train pass that stops here ?" he inquired.

"At midnight. Take tickets ten minutes afore it."

Mr. Carlton drew Laura's hand within his, and

asked for the waiting-room. There was no waiting-room, he had the pleasure of hearing, save the small, cold, bare place where he had stood thumping for the ticket clerk. The fire was nearly out; Mr. Carlton stirred it into a blaze and demanded more coal.

Placing her in a chair before it, he paid the man who had brought the portmanteau and dismissed him. Then he asked the porter, who had gone into the little place where the tickets were kept, whether refreshments could be obtained from anywhere for the lady, and was answered by the same stolid stare. Such a question had never been put in that station before, and refreshments were no more procurable than tickets. It appeared that Mr. Carlton could only resign himself to his situation.

Laura was shivering inwardly and outwardly. Mr. Carlton took off some of her things, shook them, and hung them on a chair. Indeed it was not a pleasant plight to be placed in : arrested midway in this most provoking manner, in all this discomfort.

"I am so sorry!" he murmured. "If you don't mind waiting here alone, I'll go on to the village and bring you back something in the shape of refreshment. There's sure to be an inn in it. You are trembling with the cold and rain."

"It is not that; it is not that; and for refresh-

ment, I could not touch it. Did you see him?" she continued in a shivering whisper.

"See whom?" asked Mr. Carlton.

"Papa."

He looked at her in surprise. "See him? Where?"

"In that train just gone by. He was in one of the carriages."

Mr. Carlton truly thought she must be wandering; that the disasters of their unpropitious journey had momentarily obscured her intellects.

"Lewis, I tell you he was there—papa. He was in one of the carriages, sitting forward on the seat and talking to somebody opposite. The light from the lamp fell full upon his face. It was papa, if I ever saw him."

That she was clear and rational, that she evidently believed what she asserted, Mr. Carlton saw. And though he could not give credence to so improbable a thing, nevertheless a feeling of uneasiness, lest Captain Chesney should be in pursuit, stole over him. He went to look for the stolid porter, who had disappeared, and found him at length in an outer shed, doing something to an array of tin lanterns. There he inquired about the fast train just gone by, and learnt to his satisfaction that it went whirling on, without stopping, on quite a different line of rail from that on which he and

Laura were bound. He went back and told her this, observing that she must have been mistaken.

"Lewis, it is of no use your trying to persuade me out of my own eyesight. I wish I was as sure of forgiveness as I am that it was my father."

He busied himself in many little cares for her, quite neglecting his own wet condition. Happening to look down, he perceived that of the two muddy feet she was holding to the fire, one was shoeless.

"Where's your shoe, Laura?"

"It's gone."

"Gone!"

"It came off somewhere in the road as we walked along. Oh, it is all unfortunate together!"

"Came off in the road!" repeated Mr. Carlton.

"But, my dear, why did you not speak? We could have found it; the man had the lantern."

"I was afraid to stop; afraid that we should miss the train. And I don't think I knew when I first lost it: the mud was up to my ankles."

Not a very comfortable state of affairs, in truth; and poor Laura shivered and sighed, shivered and sighed, as they waited on for the midnight train. Don't you ever attempt a similar escapade, my young lady reader, or the same perplexing griefs may fall to you.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### NEW HONOURS.

JANE CHESNEY'S position was a trying one. In the midst of the grief, it may be said the horror, she felt at the step taken by her sister Laura that eventful night, there was also the perplexity as to what her own course ought to be. *She* was powerless to prevent it now; in fact everybody else was powerless; Mr. Carlton and Laura had gained some hours' start, and could not be brought back again. Had Jane known of the detention at the station at Lichford, still she could have done nothing; the fleetest horse, ready saddled and bridled at her door, would scarcely have conveyed her, galloping like a second Lady Godiva, along that dark and muddy cross-country road, in time to catch them before the arrival of the midnight train for which they waited, for it was well past eleven ere Jane heard of it from Judith.

No; stop the flight she could not. That thought was abandoned as hopeless; and it must be remembered that Jane did not know they were gone to

Lichford; she had no clue whatever to the line of route taken. Her chief perplexity lay in the doubt of how best to convey the tidings to her father, so as to pain him least. To save him pain in any shape or form, whether mentally or bodily, Jane would have sacrificed her own life. Now and then faint hopes would come over her that their fears were groundless, that they were wholly mistaken, that they were judging Laura wrongfully; and a hundred suppositions as to where Laura could be, arose to her heated fancy: certainly the fact that Mr. Carlton had left the town for a few days, as reported to Judith by his servants, was not sufficient proof of Laura's having left it. But, even while these delusive arguments arose, the conviction of the worst lay all the deeper upon her mind.

Perhaps Jane Chesney was nearly the last in the town to hear the positive news of the truth by word of mouth. With morning light there arrived at Mr. Carlton's house the man whom he had charged to look after the missing horse: which had been found with little trouble, standing still with his nose over a field gateway. Securing him for the night, the man started before dawn to convey him to the address at South Wennock, as given him by Mr. Carlton; he had to be back to his own work betimes, at the farmer's where he was a day



labourer. When rung up, just as Judith had rung them up the night before, the servants could scarcely believe their own eyes, to see the horse arrive home in that fashion, led by a halter and covered with splashes of mud. The man explained, so far as he was cognizant of it, what had happened on the previous night; told his orders as to bringing home the horse, provided he could find him, spoke of where the carriage was lying, and said it had better be looked after.

Whether it was from this circumstance, or whether the report arose in that mysterious manner in which reports do arise, nobody knows how or where, certain it was, that when South Wennock sat down to its breakfast-tables on that same morning, half its inhabitants were talking of the elopement of the surgeon with Miss Laura Chesney. Mr. John Grey was the one to convey its certain tidings to Jane.

He was at the house very early—soon after eight o'clock. Called to a distance that day, his only chance of seeing Lucy Chesney's hands was to pay them a visit before his departure; in fact he had promised to do so on the previous night.

Jane was ready for him; Jane alone: glad of an excuse to keep the little girl in bed in that house of perplexity and trouble, Jane had bade her not rise to breakfast. Mr. Grey was pained at the

look of care on the face of Miss Chesney—let us call her so for a short while yet!—at the too evident marks of the sleepless and miserable night she had spent.

“Do not suffer this untoward event to affect your health!” he involuntarily exclaimed; and his low tone was full of tender concern, of considerate sympathy. “How ill you look!”

Jane was startled. Was it known already? But there was that in Mr. Grey’s earnest face that caused her heart to leap out to him there and then, as it might to a friend of long-tried years.

“Is it known?” she asked, her life-pulses seeming to stand still.

“It is,” he answered, with a grave face. “The town is ringing with it.”

Jane, standing before him with her quiet bearing, gave no mark of pain, save that she raised her hand and laid it for a few moments on her temples.

“I have been hoping—against hope, it is true, but still hoping—that it *might* not be; that my sister might have taken refuge somewhere from the storm, and would return home this morning. Oh, Mr. Grey! this has come upon me like a falling thunderbolt. If you knew how different from anything like this she has been brought up!”

“Yes, I feel sure of that,” he said. “It is, I fear,

a most mistaken step that she has taken. Certainly an unwise one."

"How has it become known?" asked Jane, shading her eyes.

"I cannot tell," he replied. "For one thing, I heard that Mr. Carlton's horse had been sent back this morning."

"His horse?"

"He drove your sister to Lichford, I understand, to take the train there. I met him last night as I left here; he was close to Blister Lane—about to turn into it, and I wondered what patient he could have in that locality to call him out in his carriage at night. I little thought of the expedition on which he was bent; or that he was waiting to be joined by Miss Laura Chesney. I saw her also; she must have been on her way to him."

Jane lifted her eyes. "Mr. Grey! you saw her and you did not stop her!"

John Grey slightly shook his head. "It was not possible for me to divine the errand on which she was bent. She was in the garden as I left here, and I said something to her about the inclemency of the night. I understood her to answer me—at least I inferred it—that she was only going to the gate to look at the weather. I know the thought that crossed me was, that she was anxious because her father was out in it. There's a report that

some accident occurred to the horse and carriage when they were nearing Lichford," continued the surgeon, "and that Mr. Carlton and the lady with him had to go the rest of the way on foot. It is what people are saying; I don't know the particulars."

"Nothing can be done to recall her now?" said Jane, speaking the words in accordance with her own thoughts, more than as a question.

"Nothing. The start has been too great—a whole night. They are probably married by this time, or will be before the day is out."

"Mr. Grey—I seem to speak to you as to an old friend," Jane broke off to say; "a few minutes ago and I had not believed that I could have so spoken of this to any one. *How* shall I tell my father?"

"Ah," said Mr. Grey, "it will be sad news for him. My eldest little daughter is but eight years old, but I can fancy what must be the feelings of a father at being told such. I think—I think——"

"What?" asked Jane.

"Well, it is scarcely the thing to say to you just now, but I think I would rather lose a daughter by death than see her abandon her home in this way," continued Mr. Grey in his frankness. "My heart would be less wrung. Will you allow me to ask whether Mr. Carlton was addressing her?"

"He had wished to do so, but was peremptorily forbidden by my father. That was the cause of the rupture which led to his dismissal from the house. None of us liked Mr. Carlton, except—I must of course except—my sister Laura."

That she spoke in pain—that she was in a state of extreme distress, was all too evident; and Mr. Grey felt how useless would be any attempt at consolation. It was a case that did not admit of it. He asked to see Lucy, and Jane went with him to her room. The hands were going on as well as possible, and Mr. Grey said there was not the least necessity for keeping her in bed. Poor Jane felt almost like a deceitful woman, when she reflected how far apart from the cuts had been her motive for keeping Lucy there.

"Can I be of use to you in any way?" he asked of Jane at parting.

Jane frankly put her hand into his and thanked him for his kindness. Ah, she found now, it was not Mr. Carlton's profession she had so disliked, but Mr. Carlton himself. John Grey was but a surgeon also, a general practitioner: and of him Jane could have made a friend and an equal.

"You are very good," she said. "Can you tell me the best way in which I can proceed to Pembury?"

"Are you going there?"

"I must go; I think I ought to go. Papa started

for Chesney Oaks last night—and—you are aware perhaps that it is as you feared; that Lord Oakburn is dead?"

"Yes, I know; his death has been confirmed?"

"Papa left at once for Chesney Oaks; and his absence renders my position in this crisis all the more difficult. But I shall go after him, Mr. Grey; better that he should hear of this from my lips than from a stranger's. None could soothe it to him in the telling as I can."

Fond Jane! She truly deemed that none in the world could ever be to her father what she, his loving and dutiful daughter, was. How rudely the future would undeceive her, she dreamt not yet. Just to "soothe this terrible news to him in the telling," she had rapidly determined to make the best of her way to Pembury.

Pompey was already preparing to go thither by the earliest train, and Jane started with him, leaving Lucy to the care of Judith. It was a long journey, and she meant to come back the same day, but the trouble and fatigue to herself were nothing, if she could but spare ever so little trouble to her father. There was the jolting omnibus to Great Wennock, and there was the railway afterwards—thirty miles of it; it may be questioned whether Jane, in her distress of mind, so much as knew that the omnibus made any jolts at all.

Arrived at Pembury, Jane felt undecided what to do. She did not much like to go on to Chesney Oaks ; it would seem almost as though they wished to seize upon their new possession by storm ere the poor young earl was cold on his bed. Neither did she know whether the imperious old dowager Countess of Oakburn might not be there ; and Jane felt that to tell her this disgrace of Laura's would be a worse task than the telling it to her father.

She inquired for an hotel, and was directed to the "Oakburn Arms." Then she despatched Pompey to Chesney Oaks.

"You will tell papa, Pompey, that I have come here, and am waiting to see him," she said. "You must say that I have come all this way on purpose to impart to him something of the utmost moment ; something that he must hear without delay—that I could not trust to anyone else to bring to him, for it is unpleasant news. And Pompey, *you* must not tell him : take care of that."

Pompey looked aghast at the bare suggestion. *He* tell such news to his choleric master ! "I no dare, missee," was the characteristic answer.

Chesney Oaks, a fine old place, whose park stretched down to the very gates of Pembury, was less than a mile distant. Jane, ever thoughtful, despatched Pompey in a fly, that it might be at hand to bring back her father. She then sat down

in the room to which she had been shown, and waited.

The room was on the ground floor, and she watched eagerly the way leading from Chesney Oaks. They appeared to have had as much rain at Pembury as they had had at South Wennock, to judge by the state of the roads, but it was a balmy spring day, this, and the sun shone out by fits and snatches : it shone on Jane's face at the open window.

At length she saw the fly coming back again, and the sick feeling at her heart increased, now the moment was at hand when she must meet her father with the dreadful news. But the fly, instead of drawing up to the door of the inn, continued its way past it, and Jane saw that it was empty. It seemed like a welcome respite. She supposed her father had preferred to walk, and she stood looking out for him.

But she looked in vain. There appeared no sign of him, and Jane was beginning seriously to wonder what she should do in the emergency, when a handsome chariot, bearing about it, although in mourning, all the badges of rank and state—the flowing hammer-cloth, the earl's coronet on the panels, the powdered servants, the sparkling silver ornaments on the fine horses—came bowling up to the door. Another moment and the waiter appeared,



showing in the powdered footman, who handed a small bit of twisted paper to Jane.

"For me?" she involuntarily exclaimed.

"Yes, my lady."

Jane quite started. My lady! Why, yes, she was my lady. But the salutation sounded strange to her ears, and a deep blush arose to her fair face. Opening the paper, she read the following characteristic lines written in pencil.

"I cannot imagine whatever you have come for, Jane, but you can come on to Chesney Oaks and explain. Pompey's a fool."

By which last sentence Jane gathered that poor Pompey must have managed to plunge into hot water with his master, in his efforts not to tell the secret. She also divined that the carriage had been sent for her use.

"You have brought the carriage for me?" she asked.

"Yes, my lady. My lord requested you would go on without delay."

But Jane hesitated. She thought of the fever. Not for herself did she fear it—at least it was not her own danger that struck her, but she was about to return home to Lucy, and might carry it to her.

"There may be danger in my entering Chesney Oaks," she said. "I am going home to a young

sister, a little girl, and children take disorders so easily."

"I don't think there will be much danger, my lady," returned the man. "My lord is in the left wing of the house, and the—the body of the late earl is lying in the wing at the other extremity, where he died. No one else has taken the fever."

How strange it was, too, to hear her father called my lord; how strange to spring suddenly into all this pomp and state. Jane did not see that she could hold out longer, and passed out of the room.

Gathered in the entrance passage, were the landlord of the inn, his wife, the waiter, and a chambermaid, ready to make obeisance to her as she passed. Jane felt rather little as she received the honours; she had an old black silk dress on, a shabby warm grey shawl, and a straw bonnet trimmed with black, the worse for wear. But Jane need not have feared: she was a lady always, and looked like one, dress as she would.

"Who is she?" asked the landlady in a low tone of the footman, arresting him as he was marching past her; for she did not know as yet who the stranger was, except that she was one of the family from which their inn took its sign.

"The Lady Jane Chesney; the new earl's daughter."

And the footman stood with his imposing cane, and bowed Jane into the carriage, and the people of the Oakburn Arms bowed again from its entrance ; and thus Jane was bowled off in state to Chesney Oaks, the fine old place now her father's.

Winding through a noble avenue of trees, the park stretching out on either hand, the house was gained. A red-brick mansion, with a wing extending out at either end. The wings were of modern date, and contained the handsomest rooms ; the middle of the house was cramped and old-fashioned. In the wing to the right, as they approached, the poor young earl had lain ill and died ; what remained of him was lying there now. Jane found that the carriage did not make for the principal entrance, but turned suddenly off as it approached it, continued its way to the other wing, and stopped there at a small door.

A gentleman in black—he looked really like one—was at the door to receive Jane, evidently expecting her. It was the groom of the chambers. He said nothing, only bowed, and threw open the door of a small sitting-room, where the new earl was standing.

“ Lady Jane, my lord.”

It would take Jane some little time to get accustomed to this. Lord Oakburn was in conversation with a grey-haired man who wore spectacles, the

steward, as Jane afterwards found, and some books and papers were lying on the table, as though they were being examined.

“So it’s you, Jane, is it?” said the earl, turning round. “And now what on earth has brought you here, and what’s the matter? That idiot says that it’s not Lucy’s hands, and he’ll say no more, but stares and sobs. I’ll discharge him to-night.”

Jane knew how idle was the threat; how often it was hurled on the unhappy Pompey. Before she could say a word, her father had begun again.

“The idea of your sending for me to Pembury! Just like you! As if, when you had come so far, you could not have come on to Chesney Oaks. It’s my house now—and yours. You never do things like anybody else.”

“I did not care to come on, papa,” she answered in a low tone. “I thought—I thought Lady Oakburn might be here, and I did not wish to meet her just now; I have brought very bad news. And I thought too, of the fever.”

“There’s no danger from that; the poor fellow’s lying in the other wing. And Lady Oakburn’s not here; but what difference it would make to you if she had been, I’d be glad to know. And now, what have you got to tell me? Is the house burnt down?”

Jane looked at the steward, who was standing

aside respectfully. He understood the look—that she wished to be with her father alone—and turned to his new master.

“ Shall I come in again by-and-by, my lord ? ”

Lord Oakburn nodded acquiescence. He had slipped as easily and naturally into his new position as though he had been bred to it. As the son of the Honourable Frank Chesney, he had seen somewhat of all this in his youth. Jane had not. Although reared a gentlewoman, she had been always but the daughter of a poor naval officer.

The room they were in, plain though it was as compared to some, bore its signs of luxury. The delicate paper on the walls, the gilded cornices, the rich carpet into which the feet sank, the brilliant and beautiful cloth covering the centre table! Lord Oakburn had been shown to it that morning for breakfast, and he intended to make it his sitting-room during this his temporary sojourn in the house. How things had changed with him! and, but for the terrible escapade of the previous night, what a load of care would have been removed from Jane's heart. No more pinching, no more miserable debts, no more dread of privation for her dear father.

She untied her bonnet strings, wondering how she should break it to him, how begin. Lord Oakburn pushed the steward's papers into a heap

as they lay on the costly cloth, and turned to her, waiting.

"Now, Jane, why don't you speak? What is it?"

"It is because I do not know how to speak, papa," she said at length. "I came myself to see you because I thought none could break the news to you so well as I: and now that I am here I seem as powerless to do it as a child could be. Papa, a great calamity has overtaken us."

The old sailor, whatever his roughness of manner, his petty tyranny in his home, loved his children truly. He leaped to the conclusion, in spite of Pompey's denial, that something bad had arisen from Lucy's hands. Perhaps the places had burst asunder, and she had bled to death. He believed, now that he saw Jane and her emotion, that no slight misfortune had brought her.

"The obstinate villain! Not to tell me! And you, Jane, why do you beat about the bush? Is the child dead?"

"No, no; it is not Lucy, papa; her hands are going on quite well. It—it is about Laura.

Lord Oakburn stared. "Has *she* fallen through a window?"

"It is worse than that," said Jane, in a low tone.

"Worse than that! Hang it, Jane, tell it out

and have done with it," he cried, in a burst of passion, as he stamped his foot. Suspense to a man of his temper is not easy to bear.

"Laura has run away," she said.

"Run away!" he repeated, staring at Jane.

"She quitted the house last night. She must have been gone when you left it. Don't you remember, papa, you called to her and she did not answer? Not at first—not until it was too late to do anything—did I know she had run away."

No suspicion of the truth dawned on Lord Oakburn, and Jane seemed to shrink from speaking more plainly. Compared to what he had dreaded—the death of Lucy—this appeared a very light calamity indeed.

"I'll run her," said he. "Where has she run to? What has she run for?"

"Papa, she has not gone alone," said Jane, looking down. "Mr. Carlton is with her."

"What?" shouted the peer.

"They have gone to be married, I fear. There can be no doubt of it."

A pause of consternation on the part of the earl, and then the storm broke out. Jane had never been witness to such. He did not spare Laura, he did not spare Mr. Carlton; a good thing for both the offenders that they were not within his reach in that moment of passion.

Jane burst into tears. "Oh, papa, forgive me," she said. "I ought to have told it you less abruptly; I meant to tell it you so; but somehow my powers failed me. I am so *grieved* to be obliged to bring you this pain."

Pain! yes, it was pain to the honest old sailor, pain of the keenest sting. His beautiful daughter, of whom he had been so proud! His passion somewhat subsided, he sat down in a chair and buried his face in his hands. Presently he looked up, pale and resolute.

"Jane, this makes the second. Let her go as the other did. Never you mention her name to me again, any more than you mention the other one's."

And Jane felt all the more sad when she heard the injunction of forbiddance; an injunction which she should not dare to break. She felt it all the more keenly because she had been confidently hoping that her father's new rank as a peer of England would cause the barrier of silence as to that "*other one*" to be raised.

A dinner hastily served was brought in for her, and when she had partaken of it, with what appetite she had, she proceeded to the station at Pembury to retake her departure, conducted to it in all the pomp and state that befitted her new position as the Lady Jane Chesney.



But on poor Jane's heart as she was whirled back to Great Wennock, there rested a sense of failure as to the expedition of the day. If she had but contrived to break it better! she thought in her meek self-reproach. It never occurred to that loving daughter that Lord Oakburn was just the man to whom such things cannot be "broken."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### THE RETURN HOME.

THE weather seemed to have taken an ill-natured fit and to be favouring the world with nothing but storms of hail and rain. The flight of Mr. Carlton and Laura Chesney had taken place on a Wednesday evening, and on that day week, Mr. and Lady Laura Carlton returned to South Wennock in some such a storm as the one in which they had departed from it. They had been married in Scotland, and had solaced themselves with a few days' tour since, by way of recompense for the mishaps attending their flight, but the weather had been most unpropitious.

Mr. Carlton's servants had enjoyed a week of jubilee. Orders had been received from that gentleman, written the day after his marriage, to have everything in readiness for the reception of their mistress; but the house had been so recently put in order on the occasion of the bringing in of the new furniture, that there was really nothing to do; a little impromptu cleaning, chiefly in the kitchens,

they got a charwoman in to perform, taking holiday themselves.

But on this, the Wednesday night, they had resumed duty again, and were alike on their best behaviour and in their best attire to receive their master and new mistress. A post-carriage was ordered to be at the Great Wrenock station to await the seven o'clock train, and the servants looked out impatiently.

When a carriage is bringing home folks from a wedding, it generally considers itself under an obligation to put forth its most dashing speed. So argued Mr. Carlton's servants; therefore, long before half-past seven they were on the tiptoe of expectation, looking and listening for the arrival as the moments flew.

The moments flew, however, to no purpose. Nobody came. Eight o'clock struck, and half-past eight struck, and the servants gazed at each other in puzzled wonderment as to what could be the cause of the delay.

Ben, the surgery boy, went out to the front gate, inserted the tips of his boots between the upright iron wires, and stood there taking a little riding recreation on it, which he accomplished by swinging the gate backwards and forwards. There was no troublesome household authority near, either Hannah or Evan, to box his ears and send him

off, so he enjoyed his ride as long as he pleased, whistling a popular tune, and keeping his eyes fixed in the direction of the town.

"I say," cried he, to a butcher-boy of his acquaintance, who passed on his way home from his day's work, "do you know what makes the train so late to-night?"

"What train?" asked the young butcher, stopping and gazing at Ben.

"The seven train to Great Wennock. It ought to ha' been in a good hour ago."

"It is in," said the boy.

"It isn't," responded Ben. "Who says it is?"

"I says it. I see the omnibus come in with my own eyes. Why, it's on its road back again to take the folks to the nine train."

Indisputable evidence to Ben's mind. He jumped off the gate and dashed in-doors, without the ceremony of saying good night to his friend.

"I say, the train's in; it have been in ever so long," he cried to Hannah and the others.

"No!" exclaimed Hannah.

"It have, then. Bill Jupp have just told me. He see the omnibus a-coming back at its time with his own eyes."

"Then something has detained them," decided Hannah, "and they won't be here to-night."

Quite comforting assurance. A whole night's

further holiday ! "Let's have supper," said Sarah, the additional maid who had been this week engaged by Hannah according to her master's written directions.

- "I say, though," cried Ben, "there's another train. Bill Jupp, he see the omnibus a-going back again for it."

"That don't come from their way, stupid !" corrected Hannah. "The trouble I've had, laying out their tea and things in the dining-room, and all to no purpose !" she added crossly.

Of course, their master and mistress not being home to tea or supper, there was all the more reason why the servants should enjoy theirs. And they were doing so to their hearts' content, sitting over a well-spread table, at which much laughter prevailed, and rather more noise than is absolutely necessary for digestion, when a loud ring startled them from their security.

"My goodness !" exclaimed Hannah. "If it should be them, after all ! What on earth—get along, Evan, and open the door ! Don't sit staring there like a stuck pig."

Thus politely urged, Evan sprang out of the kitchen and into the hall. He opened the front door with a swing grand enough to admit a duke, and found himself confronted with nothing but a woman and a bundle.

A large awkward bundle, which appeared to have been put hastily together, and was encased by a thick old shawl to protect it from the rain. The bearer of it was Judith. She passed Evan without ceremony or preface, and dropped the bundle on a chair in the hall.

"Why, what's that?" exclaimed Evan, in surprise, who did not recognise Judith. In fact, he did not know her.

"Can I speak a word to Lady Laura Carlton?" was the answer.

Evan looked at the woman. Hannah, who had come into the hall, looked also; the boy Ben pushed himself forward and took his share of looking.

"I come from Cedar Lodge, from Lady Jane Chesney," explained Judith, perceiving she was unknown. "These are some of Lady Laura's things; but her trunks will be sent to-morrow."

Hannah cast a contemptuous glance at the bundle. She thought it rather an unceremonious way of forwarding an instalment of a bride's wardrobe. In truth, Judith felt the same herself, but there was no help for it.

On the day of Laura's marriage, subsequent to the ceremony, she had written a half-penitent note to Jane for the escapade of which she had been guilty, and stated that the ceremony had taken place.

In this was enclosed a wholly penitential letter to her father. The superscriptions "Captain Chesney, R.N.," and "Miss Chesney," proved that Laura was in ignorance of the rise in their condition. Jane had forwarded the note to her father at Chesney Oaks, and he had flung it into the fire unread : her own letter she did not dare to answer, for she had been strictly forbidden to hold further communication of any sort with her offending sister. The late earl's funeral took place on the Monday ; Lord Oakburn returned to Cedar Lodge on the Tuesday ; and on the Wednesday morning there arrived another letter from Laura to Jane, stating that she and Mr. Carlton purposed to be at South Wennock on Wednesday evening, and begging Jane to send her clothes to her new home, to await her arrival at it, especially a certain "light silk dress."

"Not a thread of them," cried the earl, bringing down his stick decisively when Jane spoke to him. "She shall have no clothes sent from here."

"But, papa, she has nothing to wear," pleaded Jane. "She did not take with her so much as a pair of stockings to change."

"So much the better," fumed the earl. "Let her go barefoot."

But Jane, considerate even for the offending Laura, and for the straits she would be put to without clothes, ventured to appeal to her father

again in the course of the day. Not until evening would the earl unbend. And then, quite late, he suddenly announced that the things might go, and that the sooner the house was rid of them, the better.

It was eight o'clock then. Jane hastily put some things together, the light silk dress particularly named, and a few other articles that she deemed Laura might most need, and despatched Judith with them, charging her to see Lady Laura in private, and to explain how it was that the things had not been properly sent, and could not be, now, before the morrow. Hence it was that Judith stood in Mr. Carlton's hall demanding to see its new mistress.

"They have not come yet," was the reply of Hannah, given crustily.

"Not come!" repeated Judith. "My lady told me they were to return by the seven o'clock train."

"And so they sent us word, and there's the dinner-tea laid ready in the dining-room, but they haven't come. The train's in long ago, and it haven't brought 'em."

"Well," said Judith, slowly, considering how much to say and how much not, "will you tell your lady that we were not able to send her things to-day—except just these few that I have brought—



but that the rest will all be here to-morrow. I am sorry not to see her ladyship, because I had a private message for her from her sister."

"I'll tell her," answered Hannah, in an ungracious, grumbling tone; for the advent of a new mistress in the house did not meet her approbation. "I think master might have said a word to us afore he went away, and not have—what's that?"

The noise of a carriage thundering up to the gate and stopping, scared their senses away. Evan opened the door at length, but not immediately; not until the bell had sent its echoes through the house.

They came into the hall; Mr. Carlton, and his young wife upon his arm. She wore two shoes now, and a beautiful Cashmere shawl, the latter the present of Mr. Carlton. He was a fond husband in this his first dream of passion. Mr. Bill Jupp's information as to the train's arrival was incorrect. It was true that the omnibus had come back, but it brought no passengers; it had waited as long as it could, and then had to return to convey back its customers to the nine-o'clock train. An accident, productive of no ill consequences save detention, had occurred to the seven-o'clock train containing Mr. Carlton and his wife, and this caused the delay.

She came in with her beaming face, laughing at

something said by Mr. Carlton, and nodding affably to the servants by way of her first greeting to them. Very much surprised indeed did she look to see Judith standing in the background.

"Judith!" she exclaimed, "is it you?"

Judith came forward in her quiet, respectful manner. "Can I speak a word to you, my lady, if you please? Lady Jane charged me with it."

Laura dropped Mr. Carlton's arm and stared at her. The salutation was strange in her ears. "My lady!" "Lady Jane!" Had the world turned upside down, Laura Carlton had not been more surprised, more perplexed.

It must be remembered that she had known nothing of the late earl's illness; when she quitted her home to fly with Mr. Carlton, he, Lord Oakburn, was being expected at Cedar Lodge. Mr. Carlton had said nothing to her of his surmised death; and during this wedding tour in the rather remote parts of Scotland, not a newspaper had fallen under her notice. Laura was therefore still in ignorance of all that had taken place.

"What did you say, Judith?" she asked, after a pause. "Lady—Lady Jane sent you to me? Do you mean my sister?"

"Yes, my lady. She wished me to say a word to yourself."

No woman living had greater tact than Laura

Carlton. Not before her new servants would she betray her perplexity at the strange title, or give the slightest mark of indication that she did not know how it could belong to her. From the open door of the dining-room on the side of the hall streamed the light of fire and lamp, and she stepped into it followed by Judith. Mr. Carlton had turned back, after bringing her in, to see what had been left in the post-carriage.

"Judith! you called my sister Lady Jane. Has anything happened to Lord Oakburn?"

It would have been Judith's turn to stare now, but that she was too well-bred a servant to do anything of the sort. A whole week since the change! it seemed next to impossible that Lady Laura should be in ignorance of it. She answered quietly,

"Lord Oakburn is dead, my lady—that is, the late Lord Oakburn—and my master is Lord Oakburn now."

"I never heard of such a thing!" exclaimed Laura, sinking into a chair in her astonishment. "When did he die? How long have you known it?"

"He died on the Tuesday, yesterday week, my lady. He died of fever at Chesney Oaks, and the letter that came on the Wednesday morning to our house was not for him, after all, but for my master."

"And when did you find out that it was for papa?—when was it first known at home?"

"My lady, it was known just about the time that you left it. Mr. Grey was there that evening, if you remember, and he told the news of Lord Oakburn's illness; that he was lying without hope a day or two previous at Chesney Oaks. There could be no doubt then, he said, that the letters had come for my master as Earl of Oakburn."

"I wonder whether Lewis knew it?" was the question that crossed Laura's heart. "Mr. Grey spoke to him that night as he left our house. But no, he could not know it," came the next thought, in her unbounded love and confidence, "or he would have told me."

Question after question she poured upon Judith, and the woman told all she knew. Lord Oakburn was at home again now, she said, but she believed he and the young ladies were very soon to depart for Chesney Oaks.

"Judith," resumed Laura at length, her other questions being exhausted, and she lowered her voice to timidity as she spoke, "was papa very—very furious with me that night?"

"My lady, you forget that I have said he had gone before it was known that you were missing. It was to tell him of it that Lady Jane went the next day all the way to Chesney Oaks."

"True," murmured Laura. "Does he seem in a terrible way over it, now that he is back?"

"Yes, I fear he is," Judith was obliged to answer.

"And what did you come here for to-night, Judith? You said you had a message from my sister."

Judith explained about the clothes, why it was that so few had been brought, and those at the last moment. The message from Jane, though put into the least offensive words possible, was to the effect that Laura must not venture at present to seek to hold intercourse in any shape whatever with her family.

Laura threw back her head with a disdainful gesture. "Does that interdict emanate from my sister herself?" she asked.

"I think not, Miss Lau—my lady. She cannot go against the wishes of the earl."

"I know that she will not," was Laura's scornful comment. "Well, Judith, tell Lady Jane from me that it's no more than I expected, and that I hope they'll come to their senses some time."

"And the little girl whispered to me as I was coming away to give her love, if you please," concluded Judith.

"Darling child!" echoed Laura. "She's worth ten of that cold Jane."

Mr. Carlton entered as Judith departed. Laura

stood talking with him on the new aspect of affairs, but she was no wiser at the conclusion of the conversation than she had been at the beginning, as to his having known of Lord Oakburn's death previous to their flight. He drew her attention to the tea-table, which looked inviting enough with its savoury adjuncts, that Hannah had prepared and laid out.

"Yes, presently," she said, "but I will take my things off first. You must please to show me my way about the house, Lewis," she added laughing, as she turned at the door and waited. "I don't know it yet."

Mr. Carlton laughed in answer, and went with her into the hall. It was a handsomer and more spacious residence than the one she had relinquished, Cedar Lodge, but it was a sadly poor one, as placed in comparison with Chesney Oaks. On the opposite side of the hall in front was a sitting-room, where Mr. Carlton generally received any patients who came to him, and behind that room and at the back were the kitchens. On the opposite side to the kitchens and behind the dining-room a few steps led down to the surgery, which was close to the side entrance of the house, and to a back staircase.

The principal staircase wound round from the back of the hall. Laura ascended it with Mr. Carlton. There was plenty of space here. A hand-

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Lady Laura, who had been taking off her bonnet at the toilette glass, turned round and looked at her husband.

"What can it be, Lewis?"

Never had Mr. Carlton appeared so vacillating. He took up the candle to descend, went as far as the door, came back and laid it on the drawers again. Again he moved forward without the candle, and again came back.

"Where is the policeman?" he questioned.

"He's standing in the hall, sir."

"It is a strange thing people cannot come at proper hours," he exclaimed, finally taking up the wax-light to descend. "I have a great mind to say I would not see him, and make him come in the morning."

Mr. Carlton recognised the policeman as one who had been busy in the case in Palace Street. He saluted Mr. Carlton respectfully, and the latter took him into the parlour opposite the dining-room.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at this late hour, sir," he said, "but there is such a row at our station about this business that never was."

"What about? What row?" asked the surgeon.

"Well, sir, we have got a new inspector come on, through the other one being moved elsewhere, and he makes out, or tries to make out, that the affair



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